

**AMERICAN FAITH ADRIFT:
THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS NONES AND THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION**

by
Jonathan J. Hemler

A thesis submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Government

Baltimore, Maryland
September 2020

© 2020 Jonathan Hemler
All rights reserved

Abstract

American religious faith is in decline. Recent studies have recognized a dropping number of Americans who identify as Christian, contrasted with the “rise of the nones,” those Americans who assign themselves to no particular faith tradition. Amid these changes, the American electorate is growing increasingly polarized in political thought, views, and beliefs. The correlation between these two occurrences is producing consequential impacts on national cohesion and the operation of American democracy. The research in this thesis was directed at identifying connections between religion and politics, through the lens of evangelical Christianity and religious nones, and sought to determine how the relationship between the two is changing. The thesis also explored the theoretical possibility of a type of civil religion, one in which Americans might be trading traditional faith for a belief in a different worldview, politics. In other words, replacing religion with politics.

Methods for this study included the assessment of various religiously and politically themed polls as well as case studies on the evangelical Church and President Donald Trump’s use of civil religion. This project found the shrinking of religious association will continue. Polarization is affecting religious decline and more Americans are placing a greater emphasis on political engagement than any faith-based activities showing support for the hypothesis of the replacement of religion with politics. The outcome of these changes will profoundly influence the future of American unity and direction and the historical relationship between faith and government.

Readers: Dorothea Wolfson, Ph.D. and Alexander Rosenthal, Ph.D.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
List of Figures.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One – American Religious Decline: A Concerning Trend?.....	7
Literature Review.....	10
Methodology.....	18
Data Presentation.....	19
The Decline of Religious Identification.....	21
The Future of Evangelicalism.....	24
The Younger Generations.....	27
The Southern Baptist Convention.....	31
The National Association of Evangelicals.....	33
Analysis and Discussion.....	35
Conclusion.....	37
Chapter Two – American Political Polarization and Religion: What is changing?.....	40
Literature Review.....	44
Methodology.	54
Data Presentation.....	55
Evangelicals, Nones, and the Republican Party.....	56
Evangelicals, Nones, and the Democratic Party.....	58

Faith Group Polarization.....	62
Analysis and Discussion.....	63
Conclusion.....	64
Chapter Three – Politics as Faith: A New American Civil Religion.....	68
Literature Review.....	72
Methodology.....	82
Data Presentation.....	83
Trends in American Contribution Habits.....	84
Trends in Political Action Habits.....	91
Donald Trump and American Civil Religion.....	94
National Anthem Protests.....	95
Flag Burning and Monuments.....	97
The Evangelical Base.....	99
Analysis and Discussion.....	102
Conclusion.....	104
Conclusion.....	107
Bibliography.....	116
Biographical Statement.....	126

List of Figures

1.1	Percent of Americans that Identify with Various Faith Groups.....	20
1.2	Percent Religiously Unaffiliated by Generation.....	22
1.3	Percentage of No Religious Preference Among College Freshmen (1965-2009).....	24
1.4	Percentage of U.S. Adults Who Self-Identify As Evangelical.....	25
1.5	Percent Change in Religious Population (2007-2014).....	26
1.6	Percent Polled of “Born Again” Teenagers Who Explained Belief in Jesus To A Non-Believer.....	29
2.1	Percentage of Republican or Republican-Leaning Voters by Religious Affiliation (1996-2016).....	57
2.2	Percentage of Democratic or Democratic-Leaning Voters by Religious Affiliation (1996-2016).....	58
2.3	Percentage of Registered Voters by Faith Affiliation (1996, 2016).....	61
3.1	Individual Political Contributions by Industry (1992-2016).....	85
3.2	Organization Total Contributions to Federal Elections.....	87
3.3	Percentage of U.S. Adult Population Contributing to Politics (\$200+).....	89
3.4	Percentage of all U.S. Charitable Contributions to Religious Institutions.....	89
3.5	Estimated Attendance at March for Life Rallies.....	92

Introduction

James Madison, in an 1811 letter to a North Carolinian Baptist Church, penned his resolve to American separation of church and state regarding the “distinction between Religion & Civil Govt, as essential to the purity of both.”¹ Madison’s belief in this theory was grounded in its guarantee under the Constitution, which he had authored, and in a practical sense the understanding that without this separation both institutions would be adulterated.² While the U.S. has long heralded its ability—rooted in its foundation—to promote the flourishing of government and religion, this historical relationship is changing. The shifting dynamics of American religious decline and the growth of partisan politics signal the relationship may be in jeopardy. Though at times in plain opposition, much of America’s democratic success has relied upon, not only their separation but also their symbiotic progress and tension. The ruin of one coupled with the dominance of the other could upend this critical balance of American democracy.

¹ “From James Madison to Jesse Jones and Others, 3 June 1811,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

² “From James Madison to Jesse Jones and Others, 3 June 1811,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

This project was conceived by a few statistics that showed concerning trends toward this possibility. The first was the rise of the “nones” (those Americans with no religious affiliation) and the related decline of traditional faith group affiliation noted by *Pew Research Center* in 2012. The first chapter of this work, written in 2018, focuses on Pew’s finding that just under 20 percent of the American population is religiously unaffiliated.³ Since that writing, Pew updated their statistic in 2019 noting nones comprise 26 percent of the U.S population.⁴ Further, nones have grown at a steady rate, increasing by one percent of the population every year since the initial 2012 publication.⁵ Second, relating to rising nones, this work cites the decline of America’s Christian population. This statistic has also been updated following the trend recognized in 2012. At that time, Christianity, which includes both the Mainline Protestant and evangelical traditions, comprised 73 percent of the population, by 2019 that number had slipped to 65 percent.⁶

The third statistic that served as an impetus for this thesis connects the first two religious statistics to politics. It is the oft-quoted fact that Donald Trump carried 81 percent of the white evangelical vote in the 2016 election.⁷ The strength of voice in this demographic’s support for a presidential candidate showed a political unity in a religious group that rivaled the singularity of a partisan political party. In an environment of religious decline and political

³ Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, October 9, 2012.

⁴ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An update on America’s changing religious landscape,” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, October 17, 2019.

⁵ Pew Research Center, “Detailed tables: Trends in religious composition of U.S. adults,” *Pew Research Center*, October 17, 2019.

⁶ Pew Research Center, “Detailed tables: Trends in religious composition of U.S. adults,” *Pew Research Center*.

⁷ Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martinez, “How the faithful voted: A preliminary 2016 analysis,” *Pew Research Center*, November 9, 2016.

division, this point, in conjunction with the first two statistics, indicated that movement in the religious landscape and its effect on politics warranted further examination.

The Trump presidency itself reveals major changes in the way religion and politics are interacting. Trump, a man who in many ways personally counteracts and contradicts the biblical lifestyle professed by evangelicals, has specifically appealed to and portrayed himself as a champion of the interests of this faith group. Even throughout his tumultuous time in office, including impeachment by the House of Representatives, white evangelicals have remained a devoutly loyal element of his base. This represents something different in the pattern of evangelical political engagement as historically their support has relied on a president's personal moral and spiritual convictions aligning with their own. It appears, at least white evangelicals, may now be much more concerned with political victories and protection than any representation of their core beliefs in a political leader's lifestyle. In March 2020, 94 percent of white evangelicals reported it was at least somewhat important that a U.S. President *stand up* for their religious beliefs while 76 percent stated it was at least somewhat important that a president *share* their religious beliefs.⁸ Though it is important to note these evangelical statistics include only the white demographic of evangelicalism, still these changing views reveal something deeper about faith and politics. That is, in an increasingly polarized culture, politics may be outpacing and replacing religion in importance and as a primary identifier for Americans.

⁸ Pew Research Center, "White Evangelicals See Trump as Fighting for Their Beliefs, Though Many Have Mixed Feelings About His Personal Conduct," *Pew Research Center*, March 12, 2020.

Changes and strength of evangelical political engagement combined with the rise of religious nones and their political affiliations suggest deep ramifications to American political life. Politically, these groups seem to be separating and counteracting on the ideological spectrum and indicate a growing prominence of political affiliation over religion, removing once-strong deescalating buffers between Americans. This thesis attempts to understand how declining religious affiliation affects how Americans interact and identify politically. Chapter one addresses the hypothesis of declining American religion more deeply. It seeks to investigate this claim and understand how upcoming generations, in particular Millennials and Post-Millennials (or Generation Z), may affect this trend in the future. The chapter also focuses on this question through the lenses of evangelical Christianity and religious nones to determine how these groups are interacting. Much of the reassignment of American Christians and nones depends on social, cultural, theological, and political issues, especially for younger Americans as they approach adulthood in the current climate. For this reason, Chapter one looks at how evangelical Christianity may be approaching these topics to better understand American religious migration habits.

The second chapter of this work addresses the relationship between growing political polarization and religious decline. Once again using evangelicals and nones, this chapter looks at how these groups are filling, changing, and affecting the internal dynamics of the Democratic and Republican Parties. Trends are also examined in how evangelicals and nones are engaging politically and the chapter opens the door to the third and final chapter by questioning how politics may be replacing traditional religious affiliation as a primary identifier for individual Americans. Chapter two also introduces and argues an important theory, one fronted by

political scientist Michele Margolis, that U.S. politics now serves as a primary driver to religious affiliation later in life. In other words, political ideology is becoming a more influential and earlier factor in American lives than religion. Following this theory, this thesis aims to link Margolis's idea with the current state of American civil religion (ACR).

Chapter three more specifically addresses civil religion and seeks to analytically determine if Americans are trading religion for politics. The chapter looks at the trend of U.S. political engagement compared to religious engagement. Further, it examines the historical understanding of civil religion and attempts to determine how ACR is represented in the current climate. Has ACR fundamentally changed from its traditional definition during the second half of the 20th century? Does it still mean the same thing as it did then, or is it now better understood as a political tool to rally support for a specific party or cause? A case study on how President Trump has utilized civil religious themes provides context for these questions and clarity to how civil religion may or may not exist at this time. The chapter includes a discussion on the current evangelical relationship with the President and posits the 2020 presidential election will reveal how this faith group responds to a unique challenge between political and spiritual priorities.

At the time of this writing, the U.S. is experiencing extraordinary circumstances due to a global pandemic and national civil unrest after the May 2020 killing of George Floyd. The current social and political climate represents one unlike any other time in domestic history and especially so for current generations of Americans. These events provoke both individual and national introspection about belief and what America represents, a countrywide reckoning of sorts. American political and religious beliefs are wrapped tightly into this introspection and the

outcome will provide key indicators to how religion and politics are changing. Circumstances and implications at the time of the outset of this thesis between faith and politics were far less consequential than they are today. How America responds to these crises and the voice it takes as a result will lead to a better understanding of the true health, when pushed to the extreme, between these two institutions and a more accurate assessment of how well the U.S. has heeded Madison's warning.

Chapter One

American Religious Decline A Concerning Trend?

Alexis De Tocqueville, from his early observations of 19th-century American society, wrote of American religion, “The spirit of man, left to follow its bent, will regulate political society and the City of God in uniform fashion; it will if I dare put it so, seek to harmonize earth with heaven... From the start politics and religion agreed, and they have not since ceased to do so.”⁹ Tocqueville’s note of the congeniality between politics and religion has served as a shining example of the experiment of American democracy. However, identifiable changes in the traditional presence of organized religion in the 21st century U.S. landscape may be fundamentally altering this point. In October 2012, a *Pew Research Center* poll showed a growing number of Americans reported “none” as their religious belief. “Nones” are categorized as those Americans who claim no affiliation with a major faith group. Between

⁹ Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer trans. George Lawrence (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1966), 287-288.

2007 and 2012, Pew found the percentage of religiously unaffiliated Americans grew from 15 to 20 percent.¹⁰

Given the strong heritage of religious identification in America, the Pew study illustrates a potentially concerning trend for those who believe religion provides the backbone of American morality, community, and character. Though the observations from the Pew study, now over five years old, show a glimpse of the 2012 environment, generational numbers signal this trend will continue. Pew notes that those aged 18-29, the youngest group surveyed, comprise the highest number of “nones” at 32 percent. Older generations show stronger support for religious affiliation as age increases with seniors above age 65 at only 9 percent unaffiliated.¹¹ If this model holds, America will experience a major shift in how people commune and practice faith, or not, with continually decreasing numbers of religious involvement.

Religious faith groups hold critical influence and power in American politics and discourse. From the Puritan foundations of America’s birth, de Tocqueville’s 19th-century observations of the power of religious community, and modern importance of religious affiliation to certain political campaigns, religion has played a multi-faceted and crucial role in America. For example, the evangelical Christian bloc rose to political prominence during the 2000 election cycle as George W. Bush maneuvered to capture this faith group’s vote. Donald

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, October 9, 2012.

¹¹ Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*.

Trump specifically campaigned for the evangelical vote and was richly rewarded with 81 percent of white evangelicals casting votes for the Republican candidate in 2016.¹²

In 2015, evangelicals represented the largest Christian group in America and constituted 25.4 percent of the U.S. population.¹³ Will the traditional representation of the Christian church in America no longer be a trusted demographic? This project addresses the potential for change in American religious views and its relation to politics. The question is three-fold. First, is religious affiliation and identity in America really declining and more so with younger generations? Second, as one of the most populated and influential religious groups, is evangelicalism specifically declining among Millennials? Lastly, if so, what is the main factor driving younger Americans away from the Evangelical church?

Polarization in American politics, along with the changing religious practices of younger Americans, suggests young people are leaving the faith groups of their parents. A potential disconnect is a traditional characteristic of the evangelical community, unwavering support of the conservative arm of Republican politics which many young Americans see as incompatible with the true message of the Church or Scriptures. Though many reasons can explain disengagement, this idea will become prominent as young Americans continue to reject political alignments and the partisan divide—especially in their places of worship. It is important to determine how and why America is shifting, not only will this affect the makeup of

¹² Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martinez, “How the faithful voted: A preliminary 2016 analysis,” *Pew Research Center*, November 9, 2016.

¹³ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, May 12, 2015.

the fabric of the American identity, but also the way Americans vote, act, live, and pass down their beliefs and traditions to future generations.

Literature Review

Kenneth Wald's work, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, serves as a benchmark text for examining religion and its influence in America. His book not only discusses the impact of several different religious groups but also statistically examines the impact of religion on various aspects of government and public life. Wald proves the United States is an outlier to the general belief that modernity and industrialism result in the death of organized religion. He writes, "By all the normal yardsticks of religious commitment—the strength of religious institutions, practices, and belief—the United States has resisted the pressures toward secularity."¹⁴ Conclusively, after looking at the influence of religion overall, Wald adds that religious piety and participation are less influential than how Americans apply their religious beliefs. Simply, religious involvement is not as indicative of a factor for determining religiously motivated action or belief as we might believe. Additionally, he observes "An upsurge in religiously based political activity is neither to be welcomed uncritically nor condemned out of hand."¹⁵ Ultimately, religion in America has survived well and trends of resurgence or decline might be less radically altering than they appear.

Wald's work establishes an important baseline study of religion and politics, but more recent scholarly work and data analysis shows trends that reflect new collaborative insight. Prevailing is the indication referenced by the "nones" study, that religious involvement, in all

¹⁴ Kenneth D. Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 1992), 9.

¹⁵ Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 362.

groups, is in decline in America. Though Wald's second edition, published in 1992, showed a largely unchanged rate of churchgoing in earlier decades, since then participation has changed in the traditional sense. The number of religiously unaffiliated Americans has risen sharply in recent years.¹⁶ Americans are weakening in their allegiances to organized religion and the number of people without any association with religion, at any point in their lives, is growing.¹⁷ Later studies point to a more concerning view. For example, in 2007:

Younger adults are already less actively involved in their congregations than older adults are. Not only this, younger adults are currently less involved than younger adults were a generation ago. The demographics behind this declining involvement also do not bode well for the future.¹⁸

The trend in religious disengagement monitored above also follows the upcoming younger generations.

Millennials show signs of continued growth in religious non-participation. The defining birth years of the Millennial generation, like most generational groups, are disputed among academics, pollsters, and pundits. The *Pew Research Center*, for their purposes, defines Millennials as people born between 1981 and 1996 and those born after 1997 as "post-Millennials."¹⁹ Most analysts generally subscribe to this definition of Millennials. The Post-Millennials, the subsequent group to Millennials, are also referred to as Generation Z.²⁰ Generationally, Millennials are less likely than older Americans to be affiliated with a religious

¹⁶ Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 18-19.

¹⁷ Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 51.

¹⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 17.

¹⁹ Michael Dimock, "Defining generations: Where Millennials end and post-Millennials begin," *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018.

²⁰ Dimock, "Defining generations: Where Millennials end and post-Millennials begin," *Pew Research Center*.

group and less likely to participate when compared to older generations at the same age.²¹

Although Millennial religious affiliation is declining, they do share many of the same spiritual beliefs and religious views as older generations and hold traditionally to these values.²² They also demonstrate their spirituality in less formalized ways as many prefer independent and personal connections outside of a traditional house of worship.²³ A key difference is the divergent political and social views of Millennials compared to previous generations. They are more likely to embrace less conservative political leanings and views that confront traditional religious doctrines.²⁴

Translating to evangelical Christianity, evangelical beliefs have meshed easily with socially conservative politics, but “...younger evangelicals are not as closely tied to the Republican Party as are older generations....”²⁵ The shift can be traced in some part to general dissatisfaction with President George W. Bush among younger evangelical Christians.²⁶ The impact of more recent administrations namely Obama and Trump might continue to provide clarity and empirical support for this trend.

²¹ Richard D. Waters and Denise Seveck Bortree, ““Can We Talk About the Direction of This Church?’: The Impact of Responsiveness and Conflict on Millennials’ Relationship With Religious Institutions,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 11:4, November 20, 2012, 201 and Luis Lugo, “Religion Among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active than Older Americans, But Fairly Traditional in Other Ways,” *Pew Research Center: A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Report*, February 2010.

²² Luis Lugo, “Religion Among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active than Older Americans, But Fairly Traditional in Other Ways,” *Pew Research Center: A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Report*, 2.

²³ Melissa H. Sandfort and Jennifer G. Haworth, “Whassup? A Glimpse Into the Attitude and Beliefs of the Millennial Generation,” *Journal of College and Character*, 3:3, 2002.

²⁴ Lugo, “Religion Among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active than Older Americans, But Fairly Traditional in Other Ways,” *Pew Research Center: A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Report*, 2.

²⁵ Amy E. Black, “Evangelicals, Politics, and Public Policy,” in *The Future of Evangelicalism in America*, ed. Candy Gunther Brown and Mark Silk (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 148.

²⁶ Black, “Evangelicals, Politics, and Public Policy,” in *The Future of Evangelicalism in America*.

Another recognizable trend related to conservatism is, even with an overall decline in religious participation, a correlation between greater religious participation and more politically conservative views. Data collected from 1972 to 2008 show this connection has grown stronger after 1992.²⁷ Surveys found the frequency of service attendance affected the strength of both political and social views, equating greater attendance with stronger conservative views.²⁸ This projects a broadening gap between, not only those within faith groups but also more generally between those who are regular religious participants and the rising “nones.” This gap, however, has the potential to feed polarization and those who will benefit from increased division. The rift represents the potential for a developing “culture war” and is “unhealthy for the civic life of our nation.”²⁹

The factors contributing to this growing divide, and more broadly to the lessening of religious identification in America, are largely debated among academics and researchers. Certain trends manifest and warrant discussion. Strongly represented is the thesis that changes in family structure and American home life with new generations have pushed back religious involvement. The age at which Americans are married, the age they begin having children, and the number of children they have, greatly affects their level of affiliation with organized religion.³⁰ Because younger Americans are beginning these life cycles at a later age than previous generations, they are not interested in connecting with local church communities. This

²⁷ Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 95-96.

²⁸ Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 95-96.

²⁹ Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, 232.

³⁰ Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, 17.

delay holds consistent with the upcoming generation and points to a continued decline in religious affiliation.³¹

Family structural changes also contribute to this as previous generations are characterized by a more traditional makeup of a two-parent household with children which was more likely to identify with a faith group. Family dynamics of younger Americans are far less traditional and reflect greater diversity producing a broader mixture, or lack thereof, in religious participation.³² Many other variables affect these changes in generational differences and religious affiliation including education, the internet, social media, income, and the state of the economy.

An alternative explanation for a lack of religious membership is reaction to the association of traditional religion and conservative politics. Referencing the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, starkly demonstrated in the 1990s and 2000s, some scholars argue the conservative political connotation affiliated with religion pushed many lukewarm Americans away from a religious subscription. "After 1990 more people thought that saying you were religious was tantamount to saying you were a conservative Republican. So people who are not particularly religious and who are not conservative Republicans now are more likely to say that they have no religion."³³ As polarization continues to strengthen with religious affiliation, this could drive a more recent surge in faith group non-affiliation. Younger generations of

³¹ Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, 17.

³² Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 52-53.

³³ Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 20-21.

Americans, more open to liberal social and political views than their parents, could intensify polarization within religious circles.

Protestant Christians have not been immune to decreased involvement in faith groups. Mainline Protestants, typically more socially and theologically liberal than conservative evangelical Christians, have experienced a drastic loss in numbers. Interestingly, perhaps tied to the noted conservatism and religious affiliation connection, evangelical groups have survived better than other Christian branches.

Since 1972, the percentage of Americans affiliated with theologically more liberal, mainline denominations has steadily declined while the percentage affiliated with more conservative, evangelical denominations increased slightly until the early 1990s and has remained stable since then. By 2008, twice as many people claimed affiliation with conservative denominations as with theologically more liberal ones: 28 percent compared with 14 percent.³⁴

In addition to conservatism, evangelicals true to their name and belief in evangelizing to nonbelievers, have increased their membership. Former Catholics make up the largest group of new evangelicals showing a rise from four to nine percent in one generation.³⁵ Retention of new members is the greatest contributor to evangelical membership success. The Evangelical church has historically retained their young members through the sometimes-unstable transition to adulthood. Evangelicals have also surpassed Mainline Protestants and other groups because “they have drawn in more converts, they have been more successful in attracting former Catholics, and they have done better at launching churches that drew in recruits in parts of the country that were not their traditional bastions of strength.”³⁶

³⁴ Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 87.

³⁵ Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, 79.

³⁶ Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, 80-81.

Though evangelicals have demonstrated more retention than most, Millennials not only make up the largest generational portion of the religiously unaffiliated, but their representation in evangelical denominations is the least of all evangelical generations. In 2007, Millennials composed only 11 percent of Evangelical Protestants, the smallest percentage of all generations, and only one percent greater than Mainline Protestants, the lowest represented millennial religious group polled.³⁷ Given the weak representation of Millennials in the evangelical community, the generational differences between evangelical Millennials and older members are significant. Young evangelicals are more likely to match social views with their generational colleagues outside of the religious tradition, but do hold mixed political views from their counterparts and may align more politically with older evangelicals on certain issues.³⁸

Where evangelical Millennials map on various issues is difficult to track compared to their secular counterparts and other generations within and outside of the faith. Even with declining religious participation among Millennials and generational differences, sustained consistency within the evangelical community exists. “The relative size of evangelicals within American society in 2050 will likely continue to remain about the same size as that found today—and this is true despite the likely growth in the population of the religiously unaffiliated over the same period of time.”³⁹

Further clouding the future outlook of evangelical and broader religious affiliation are the generational characteristics of Millennials, the more recent political and social

³⁷ Corwin E. Smidt, *American Evangelicals Today*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 73.

³⁸ Smidt, *American Evangelicals Today*, 219.

³⁹ Smidt, *American Evangelicals Today*, 224.

environment, and the effect of upcoming generations. An indicative trend is declining confidence in organized religion and specifically religious leaders. “Between 1973 and 2008, the numbers of people with a great deal of confidence in religious leaders declined from about 35 percent to under 25 percent.”⁴⁰ The study also shows Americans had less confidence in religious leaders than in leaders of other institutions.⁴¹ Combined with the skeptical characteristic of Millennials, this potentially highlights a growing concern for religious affiliation. In a study on Millennial relationships with religious institutions, the authors found, “...the key to increasing Millennials’ involvement with organized religion is to increase their feelings of trust and satisfaction. These findings echo existing literature that documents the flight from established, traditional religious denominations for nondenominational institutions.”⁴² Additionally, Millennials desire a relationship with religious groups that serve and address their concerns, needs, and doubts in return for participation.⁴³

Considering the noted pushback from the conservative political identity and the Millennial generational differences in political and social issues, evangelical and other Protestant faith group support for President Trump in the 2016 election and amidst current policy decisions, could further isolate younger Americans. Recent hot-button issues such as immigration policy and gun control highlight potential conflict areas between younger and older generations of Americans within religious communities. Another important aspect and issue in this paper is the lack of recently collected data and polling. Almost all data analyzed in

⁴⁰ Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 76.

⁴¹ Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 78.

⁴² Waters and Bortree, “‘Can We Talk About the Direction of This Church?’: The Impact of Responsiveness and Conflict on Millennials’ Relationship With Religious Institutions,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 210.

⁴³ Waters and Bortree, “‘Can We Talk About the Direction of This Church?’: The Impact of Responsiveness and Conflict on Millennials’ Relationship With Religious Institutions,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 211.

this study covers decades of time, but most recently, only the end of the first decade of the 2000s. The aforementioned environment, which includes a new generation of Post-Millennials or Generation Z is mostly, if not completely, excluded. School shooting protests, immigration disputes, and the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, could provide valuable insight into potential changes in religious affiliation and evangelical identification. This time period will help illustrate a more accurate and definitive picture of the future American religious landscape.

Methodology

This study uses data from various religious polls to evaluate the questions of the decline of American religious affiliation presently and in future generations, the decline of evangelical identification among Millennials, and the reasons for separation from the evangelical faith. In most cases, pollsters directly asked participants for self-assessed religious identity, from sources including *Pew*, *Gallup*, and *PRRI*.⁴⁴ This study examines the results from these polls, which ask related questions, to find similarities or trends in the results. The compiled figures include separate polls that ask different questions applicable to the overall research questions. *Barna* studies were used to provide polling answers of religiously affiliated youth and Generation Z input.⁴⁵ Comparing trends over time to different polling questions and sources comprises the majority of the study to show generational changes in religious affiliation.

⁴⁴ Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape" *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, May 12, 2015 and Frank Newport, "2017 Update on Americans and Religion," *Gallup*, December 22, 2017 and Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, "America's Changing Religious Identity," *PRRI*, September 6, 2017.

⁴⁵ Barna, "Gen Z: Your Questions Answered," *Barna*, February 6, 2018 and Barna, "Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z," *Barna*, January 24, 2018.

Case studies on recent changes in the Southern Baptist Convention and National Association of Evangelicals, in terms of membership, leadership, and views, provide a relevant and timely look at the majority of the evangelical denomination as an indicator of the larger evangelical community.

Data Presentation

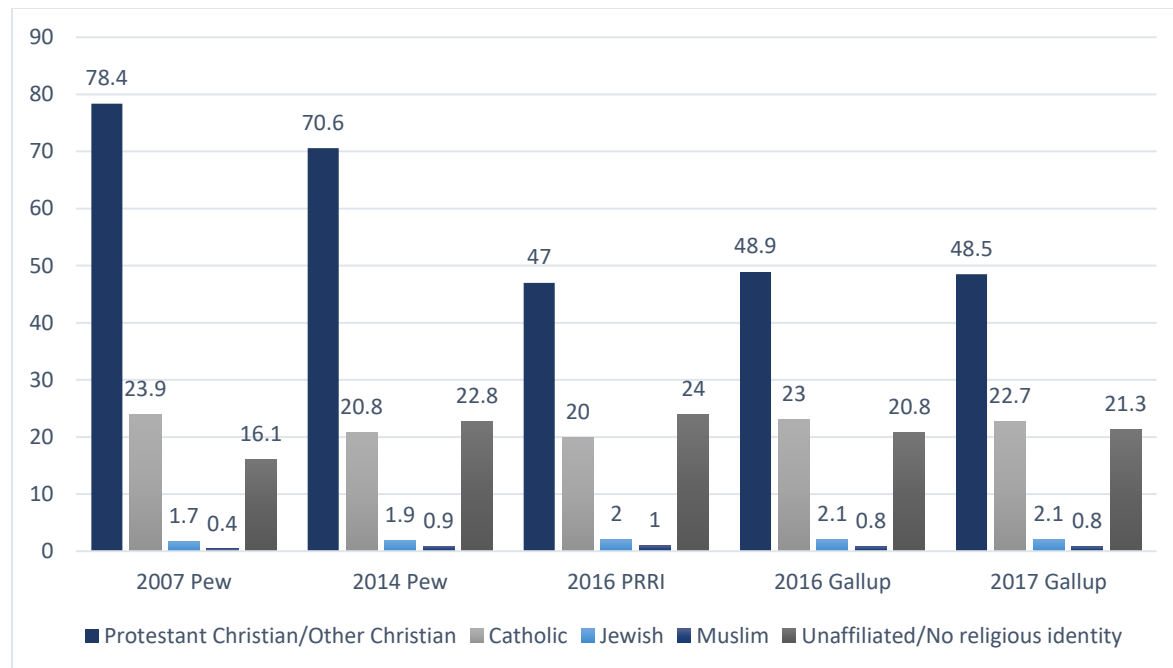
As referenced in the literature review, many variables affect what one might define as religious affiliation. Several aspects determine religious affiliation or identification in the U.S. and are important to understand when attempting to determine decline. These include self-identification, time or finances contributed to a religious faith group, attendance at weekly services, and also the individual strength of religious views shared with a specific group. This study centers on assessing affiliation primarily by self-identification by polling participants and views and beliefs of upcoming generations.

First, is America actually becoming less religiously affiliated? Three recent polls provide important evidence about how Americans view religious identification and affiliation. Figure 1.1 shows the percentage of respondents who identified with various faith groups in a 2007 and 2014 Pew, a 2016 Public Religion Research Group (PRRI), and a 2016 and 2017 Gallup poll. Pew respondents were asked the religious denomination with which they most identified. If respondents described themselves as “born-again or evangelical Christian” without giving a specific denomination, they were associated with the evangelical Protestant faith group.⁴⁶ PRRI

⁴⁶ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, 103.

used the same two terms when categorizing evangelicals and also used self-identifying questions.⁴⁷

Figure 1.1 – Percent of Americans that Identify with Various Faith Groups



Sources: Pew Research Center, Public Religion Research Institute, and Gallup. Graph compiled by the author.

As shown in Figure 1.1, the percentage of Americans affiliated with a religious faith group is in decline. Several interesting trends emerge in religious affiliation over time. First, Protestant Christianity, the largest group in each poll shows a decline from 78.4 percent of the American population in 2007 to 70.6 percent in 2014 (Pew).⁴⁸ A separate poll reports a small decline in Protestant Christianity in 2016 at 48.9 percent to 48.5 percent in 2017 (Gallup).⁴⁹ Overall, Gallup shows a marginal decline in Catholic affiliation as well between 2016 and 2017.⁵⁰ Interestingly, all other major groups are relatively steady, with almost no change in

⁴⁷ Cox and Jones, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” *PRRI*.

⁴⁸ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*.

⁴⁹ Newport, “2017 Update on Americans and Religion,” *Gallup*.

⁵⁰ Newport, “2017 Update on Americans and Religion,” *Gallup*.

affiliation between 2007 and 2017. Specifically, Jewish affiliation held stable or grew slightly while Muslims held stable, or in the case of the Pew poll, grew by a half percent.

The Decline of Religious Identification

Another observation is the rise in the unaffiliated or “nones” percentage. From 2007 to 2014 Pew reported an increase of 6.7 percent in no religious identity while Gallup showed half a percent increase from 2016 to 2017.⁵¹ The PRRI data from 2016 closely matches the 2016 percentages from Gallup. In 2016, PRRI reported the highest unaffiliated response at 24 percent.⁵² Referencing the 2012 Pew survey that reported the rise of the “nones,” Pew recorded a 2.8 percent increase in unaffiliated respondents in 2014.⁵³ Compared to the five percent increase from 2007 to 2012, this rate is holding strong. This more recent data shows a decline in major faith group affiliation over time. Judaism and Islam represent a small but slowly growing aspect of the religious American landscape while the larger groups of Protestant Christianity and Catholicism are experiencing consistently decreasing numbers of affiliates.

While religious affiliation presents an interesting window into American religious identification and life, the data suggest there are generational differences for those who do not identify with any particular religion. Whereas Figure 1.1 shows the overall percentage of American religious affiliation without taking into account generational differences, Figure 1.2 represents only those who do not identify with a specific religion (the nones) by generation.

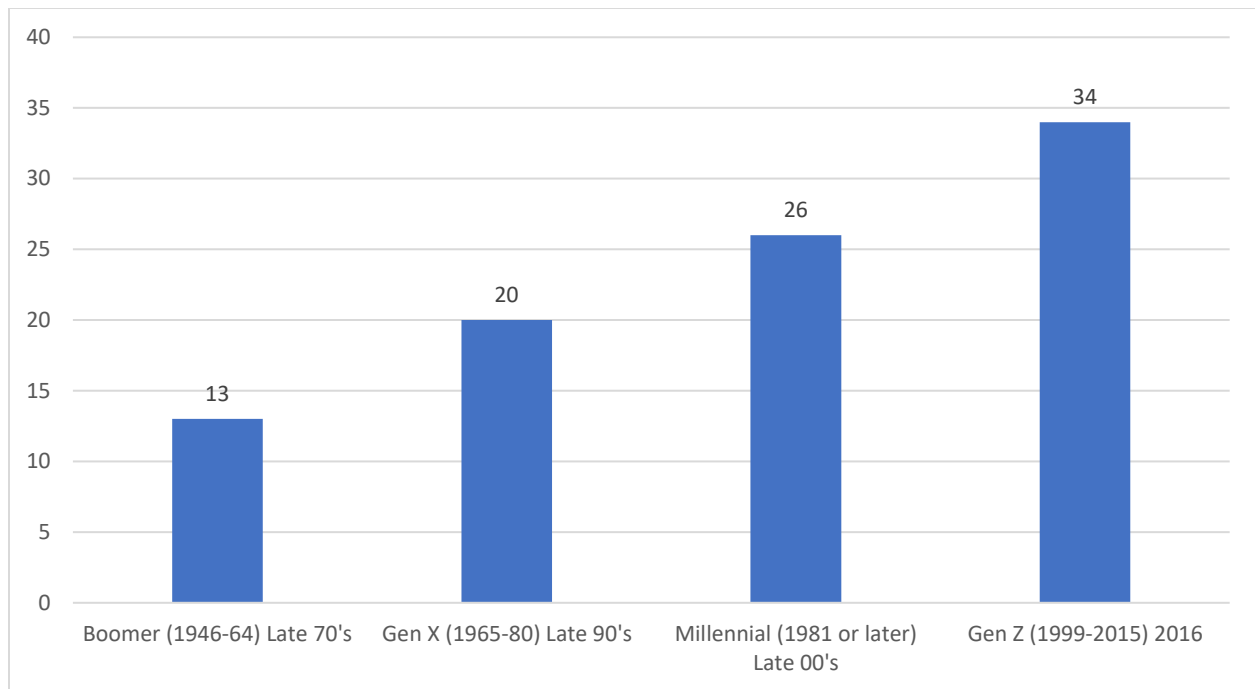
⁵¹ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life* and Newport, “2017 Update on Americans and Religion,” *Gallup*.

⁵² Cox and Jones, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” *PRRI*.

⁵³ Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life* and Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*.

Accounting for generations provides insight into the future and a look at how America is changing compared to the past.

Figure 1.2 – Percent Religiously Unaffiliated by Generation



Sources: Pew Research Center and Barna. Graph compiled by the author.

Figure 1.2 shows the percentage of religious nones in four different generations at comparable ages. This reduces the impact of the change in religious views as generations grow older and offers a more accurate assessment of changes in America's religious identification. The figure shows a consistent increase in religious non-affiliation with the newest Generation Z, those born between 1999 and 2015, with the highest percentage of all generations, 34 percent.⁵⁴ This illustrates a continued generational increase in separation from major faith groups in America.

⁵⁴ Lugo, "Religion Among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active than Older Americans, But Fairly Traditional in Other Ways," *Pew Research Center: A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Report*, 1 and Barna, "Gen Z: Your Questions Answered," *Barna*, February 6, 2018.

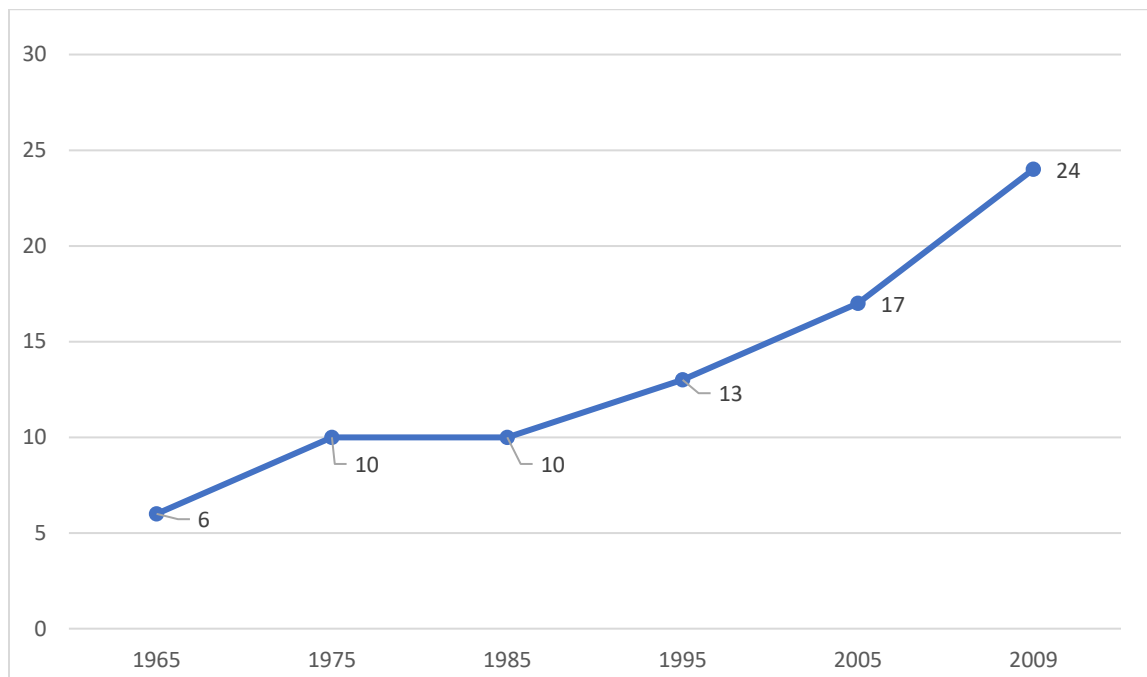
Another study, tracking American nones among youth ages 18-29 conducted between 1973 and 2008 yielded similar, if not more telling, results. The study showed religious non-affiliation at about 13 percent in 1973 with the lowest, 11 percent, just before 1990.⁵⁵ After 1990, the rate increased significantly with the highest percentage at the most recent date, above 25 percent in 2008.⁵⁶ Figure 1.3 shows a jump from college freshmen who had no religious preference at just above five percent in 1965 to just below 25 percent in 2009.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2010), 125.

⁵⁶ Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 125.

⁵⁷ Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 124.

Figure 1.3 – Percentage of No Religious Preference Among College Freshmen (1965-2009)



Source: Putnam and Campbell. Graph compiled by the author.

Given the dramatic increase in religious nones for each generation, it is likely this trend will continue and the percentage of Americans without a religious affiliation will continue to rise, diluting the representation of religion in America.

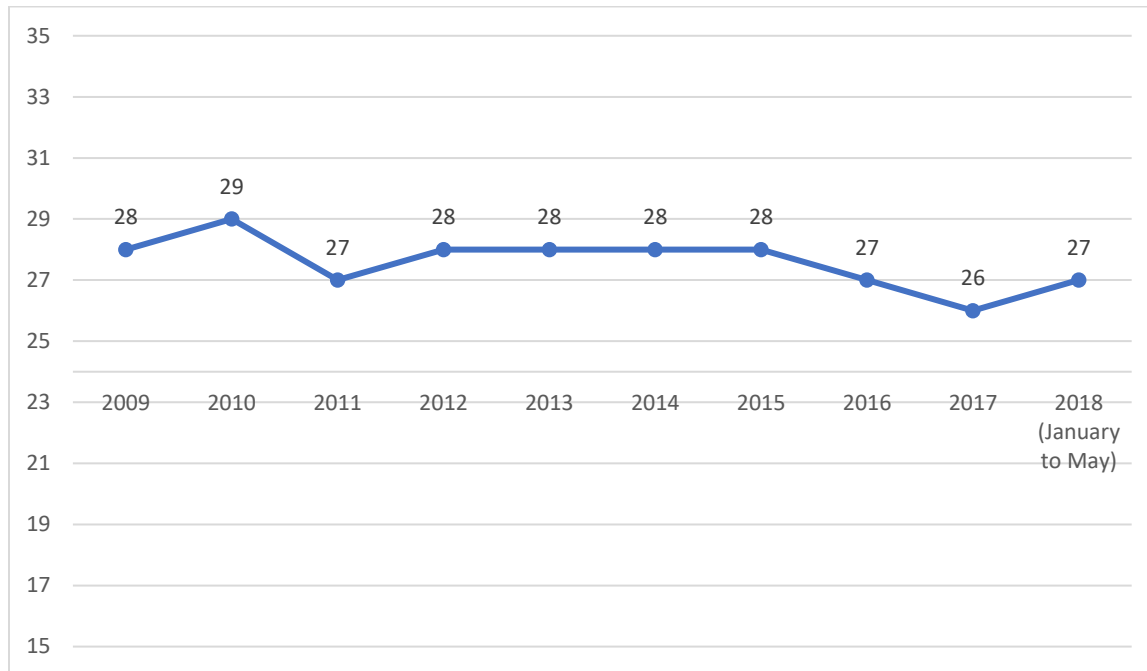
The Future of Evangelicalism

The next question concerning the future status of evangelicalism as a specific faith group will be largely determined by future generations. Evangelical Christians might represent the most significant demographic in understanding trends in U.S. religious dynamics. Due to their political influence and strong numbers the status of evangelical Christianity is integral in determining the overall picture of American religion. Analyzing evangelicalism involves a similar approach to observing any faith group, looking at the overall scope of American identification

followed by a study of younger generations and their relationship with the evangelical label.

Figure 1.4 shows a yearly trend from Pew Research of evangelical affiliation.

Figure 1.4 – Percentage of U.S. Adults Who Self-Identify As Evangelical



Source: Pew Research Center. Graph compiled by the author.

For nearly a decade, the evangelical community has remained relatively unchanged.

Pew reports only a one percent decrease in self-identified evangelicals from 2009 to 2018.⁵⁸ At no point in the study did the percentage change more than three points, though the smallest percentage does occur in 2017 and Pew notes the 2018 collected data is difficult to assess at such an early point in the year.⁵⁹ Though the most recent years could indicate a slow decline in

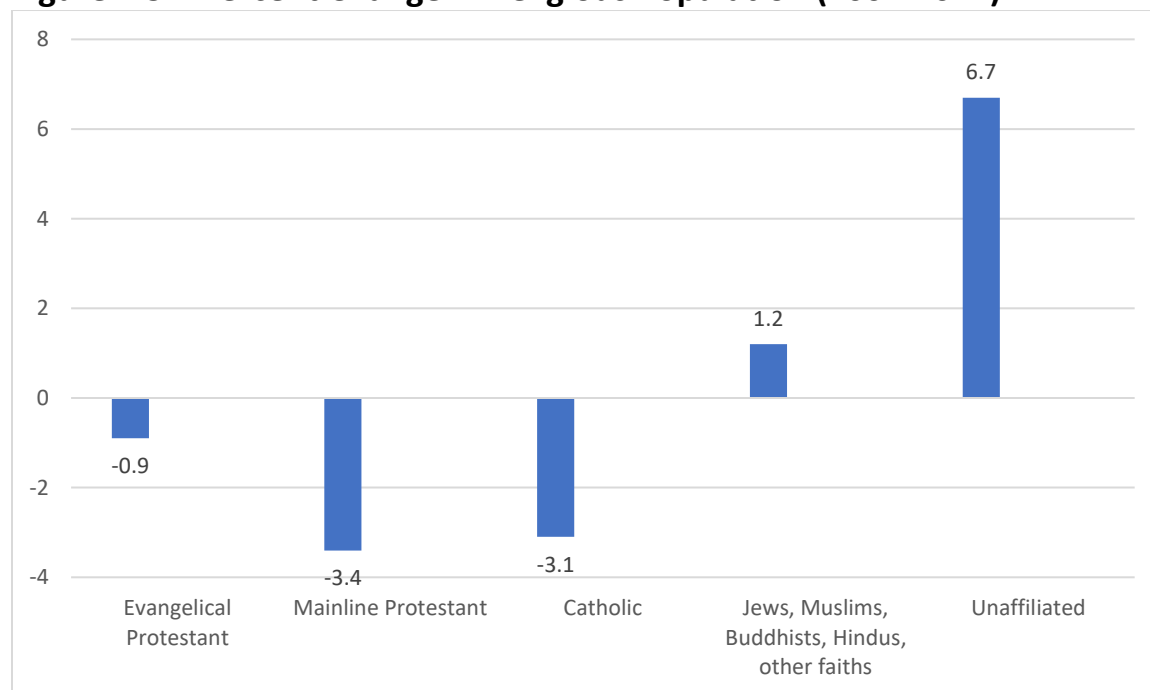
⁵⁸ Pew Research Center, "How Does Pew Research Center Measure the Religious Composition of the U.S.? Answers to Frequently Asked Questions," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, July 5, 2018.

⁵⁹ Pew Research Center, "How Does Pew Research Center Measure the Religious Composition of the U.S.? Answers to Frequently Asked Questions," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*.

evangelicalism, the percentage holds stable over time showing surprising, when compared to other religious groups, consistency in affiliation.

The Pew large-scale religious landscape study published in 2015, illustrates the role of evangelical identification compared to other major faith groups. The study conducted from 2007 to 2014 does not include the most recent years from Figure 1.4 but does provide valuable information. Figure 1.5 indicates the change in religious faith group affiliation in America during a seven-year span.

Figure 1.5 – Percent Change in Religious Population (2007-2014)



Source: Pew Research Center. Graph compiled by the author.

As shown in Figure 1.5, compared to other major faith groups, evangelical Christians experienced the lowest decline rate with only a 0.9 percent negative change in affiliation.⁶⁰ Other groups, which included Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism did increase, but only when taken

⁶⁰ Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape" *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, 3.

as a collective group including other unnamed smaller faiths. Notably, the 6.7 percent increase in the unaffiliated group, far exceeds the mostly negative trend in overall faith group affiliation.⁶¹ In Pew's study, Christianity in general, experienced a marked decline, though the evangelical Protestant tradition largely held stable. Pew assesses Mainline Protestants, along with other Christian affiliates, are losing greater numbers within the Christian label contributing to an overall decline. From 2007 to 2014, Pew determined the Christian population in America decreased from between 2.8 million and 7.8 million.⁶² Given the small percentage of evangelical decline in Figure 1.5, the Pew study concludes, considering the margin of error, that Evangelical Protestants in number have remained unchanged or possibly increased by 5 million participants.⁶³

The Younger Generations

Once again, as in the more general discussion of religious faiths, examining the preferences, leanings, and affiliations of Millennials and Post-Millennials to the evangelical and Mainline Protestant faith groups shows a better glimpse of changes in the religious landscape. This section assesses the viewpoints and identities of upcoming generations to answer the question if young evangelicals are leaving the faith, then why? Younger Americans not only show a dramatic increase in religious non-affiliation compared to older generations, but they also comprise the smallest age group of evangelical believers. In a 2007 Pew study, 18 to 29-year-olds represented only 22 percent of the total population of American evangelical

⁶¹ Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape" *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, 3.

⁶² Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape" *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, 7.

⁶³ Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape" *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, 9.

churches, the lowest age group by four percentage points of all other generations in that community.⁶⁴ In the Mainline Protestant tradition, 18 to 29-year-olds represented only 12 percent of the faith group while they held nearly equal representation to other generations in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.⁶⁵

A more recent study, published in 2018, shows a growing separation from organized religion and specifically Christianity in younger generations. A major finding is a roughly doubled number of self-identified Atheists in Generation Z compared to Millennials. 13 percent of Generation Z members claimed Atheism, while only seven percent of Millennials identified with this label.⁶⁶ Generation Z also showed a two percent less affiliation with Christianity than Millennials.⁶⁷

Another Barna poll observed the spiritual actions of teenagers ages 13 to 17, including one of the core tenets of evangelicalism, the sharing of faith with non-believers. Figure 1.6 represents the responses of over 600 “born again” evangelical teenagers from 1997 to 2009. Among other personal activities, participants were asked if they had proselytized to non-believers in the past year.

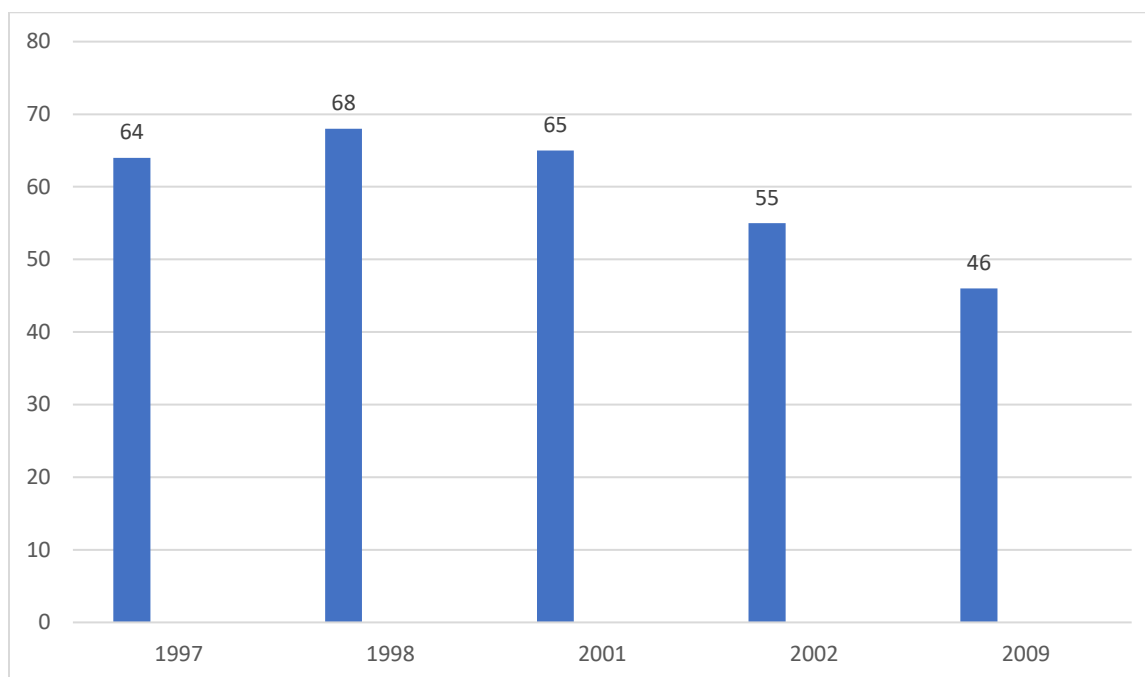
⁶⁴ Lugo, “Religion Among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active than Older Americans, But Fairly Traditional in Other Ways,” *Pew Research Center: A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Report*, 3.

⁶⁵ Lugo, “Religion Among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active than Older Americans, But Fairly Traditional in Other Ways,” *Pew Research Center: A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Report*, 3

⁶⁶ Barna, “Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z,” *Barna*, January 24, 2018.

⁶⁷ Barna, “Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z,” *Barna*.

Figure 1.6 – Percent Polled of “Born Again” Teenagers Who Explained Belief in Jesus To A Non-Believer



Source: Barna. Graph compiled by the author.

As represented in Figure 1.6, the number of teenagers who reported proselytizing peaked at nearly 70 percent in 1998, but personal evangelism dropped to 46 percent by 2009.⁶⁸ Although prayer and tithing also decreased over time, the declining percentage of evangelism of non-believers could represent a more public recession of the faith group in American culture among younger generations. It could also represent a disengagement from involvement in civic life in general.

Determining the exact reasons for the shrinking of Millennial and Post-Millennial involvement in religion, and specifically evangelical Christianity is a difficult task. Many factors influence a young person's propensity to disengage. A 2016 study polled non-Christians from

⁶⁸ Barna, "How Teenagers' Faith Practices are Changing," *Barna*, July 12, 2010.

multiple generations to determine their greatest barriers to faith. The greatest barrier to all generations involved the issue of balancing a good God with the presence of evil and suffering in the world while the second greatest barrier was the view that Christians are hypocrites. 23 percent of Generation Z responded to Christian hypocrisy with 29 percent choosing the conflict between a good God and evil or suffering as their largest barrier.⁶⁹ Millennials had the highest collective voice of any of the four generations polled at 31 percent on Christian hypocrisy as their primary barrier to faith.⁷⁰

Based on the changing and differing social and political views of both secular and religious Millennials from their parents, the perceived hypocrisy of American Christians by non-believers in this generation could represent a response to the increased political conservatism associated with religious identification. It is also possible the strong Republican and evangelical support for Trump in the 2016 election served as a galvanizing event for younger generations skeptical and troubled about an increasingly politicized faith. However, a July 2018 Pew study explains the trending decline of Christian affiliation in America preceded recent political events.⁷¹ A 2016 poll noted, "...a millennial 'exodus' from religion precisely over the conservative stance against gay rights in their churches—fully a third of 'religious nones' claim to have left religion because of a disagreement over gay rights."⁷² The authors explain the increase in no religious identification as a reflected phenomenon in the religious sphere of the

⁶⁹ Barna, "Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z," *Barna*.

⁷⁰ Barna, "Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z," *Barna*.

⁷¹ Pew Research Center, "How Does Pew Research Center Measure the Religious Composition of the U.S.? Answers to Frequently Asked Questions," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*.

⁷² Paul A. Djupe, Jacob R. Neihsel, and Kimberly H. Conger, "Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked to State Rates of the Nonreligious? The Importance of Salient Controversy," *Sage Journals Political Research Quarterly*, 1-13, April 26, 2018.

increasingly partisan divide in America.⁷³ Recent changes in the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention illustrate a growing schism among evangelicals perhaps due to this growing divide and politicization of religious beliefs inside the Christian community.

The Southern Baptist Convention

Regarding the issue of Millennial evangelical disengagement, the Southern Baptist Convention's recent evolution provides a relevant case study of a denomination directly confronting this issue. Arguably, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is the largest and most influential organization under the American evangelical label. The SBC is a widespread conglomeration of affiliated churches that includes over 47,500 Baptist fellowship churches and 4,500 mission churches.⁷⁴ The total membership of parishioners in the SBC exceeds 15 million with over 5 million weekly service attendees.⁷⁵ As a major institution in the American evangelical community, the SBC has recently faced changes in membership trends, leadership, and embroiled public relations in the past year. Although the number of Southern Baptist-affiliated churches and worship service attendees increased in 2017, the SBC has reported an overall loss of 1.3 million committed members since 2006.⁷⁶ Baptism rates also fell for eight of the past ten years with 26.5 percent fewer baptisms than in 2007.⁷⁷ Even with an increase in church plants and attendees, declining membership and baptisms illustrates a lack of strong

⁷³ Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger, "Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked to State Rates of the Nonreligious? The Importance of Salient Controversy," *Sage Journals Political Research Quarterly*, 3.

⁷⁴ Southern Baptist Convention, "Fast Facts About the SBC," *Southern Baptist Convention*, June 26, 2018.

⁷⁵ Southern Baptist Convention, "Fast Facts About the SBC," *Southern Baptist Convention*.

⁷⁶ Lisa Cannon Green, "ACP: Worship attendance rises, baptisms decline," *Baptist Press*, June 1, 2018.

⁷⁷ Green, "ACP: Worship attendance rises, baptisms decline," *Baptist Press*.

individual commitment to the organization and perhaps a shift to the middle among more lukewarm evangelicals.

In May 2018, during the height of the #MeToo movement, the Southern Baptist and evangelical community experienced a major crisis, when a prior student of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary revealed to the *Washington Post* that Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary leader Paige Peterson, along with other officials, did not properly report her rape allegation and encouraged her to forgive and drop the charge in 2015.⁷⁸ As a result of the nationally publicized controversy, Patterson, a prior president of the SBC and a conservative evangelical, was fired by the board and stripped of benefits.⁷⁹ His firing resulted in a social media frenzy and conflict between members of the evangelical community, furthering division among parishioners. Shortly following this shakeup, the Southern Baptist Convention held a presidential election in June during an annual meeting in Dallas which resulted in the election of J.D. Greear, a 45-year-old pastor from North Carolina, who received 68.6 percent of the vote.⁸⁰

The election of Greear, though a prior mentee of Patterson, represents a transition within the SBC from the old guard leadership in a direction largely separated from the views of traditional SBC leaders. Greear, the youngest SBC president ever elected, brings vitality and youthfulness that reflects an eagerness to approach the issues of the younger generations and seeks a departure from previous political involvement. In a response to controversial remarks by Patterson concerning female victims of abuse, Greear replied, "Abuse can never be

⁷⁸ Kate Shellnut, "Paige Patterson Fired by Southwestern, Stripped of Retirement Benefits," *Christianity Today*, May 30, 2018.

⁷⁹ Shellnut, "Paige Patterson Fired by Southwestern, Stripped of Retirement Benefits," *Christianity Today*.

⁸⁰ Barbara Denman, "J.D. Greear elected SBC President," *Baptist Press*, June 12, 2018.

tolerated, minimized, hidden or handled internally... Those in leadership who turn a blind eye toward abuse are complicit with it and must be held accountable.”⁸¹

Furthermore, in contrast to other evangelical leaders devoted to furthering the Christian mission in American politics and conservatism, Greear is expected to directly confront the historical partisan approach of the evangelical community. He has stated, “Our general approach is that the church as an organization should not typically get involved in the particulars of policy but should limit itself more to teaching the truth....The younger generation has a hunger for getting beyond the partisan stuff and saying, ‘What it’s like to follow Jesus in 2018 and not be a Republican Christian or Democrat social progressive Christian?’”⁸² Whether a strategic move toward winning young Americans, a reckoning with partisan affiliations in the past, or a backlash to social progressivism, the SBC is facing a top-down change that will surely impact the future of the evangelical movement in America.

The National Association of Evangelicals

A second case that validates the shift in evangelicalism in America away from politics and potentially toward a strategic approach to reach younger disengaged Americans, is the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). As an evangelical organization, the NAE rivals the size and scope of the SBC. Founded in 1942, it includes over 45,000 churches from 40 denominations and seeks “...to influence society for justice and righteousness and gather the many voices of evangelicals together to be more effective for Jesus Christ and his cause.”⁸³

⁸¹ Yonat Shimron, “J.D. Greear is ready to give Southern Baptists a makeover,” *Religion News Service*, June 6, 2018.

⁸² Shimron, “J.D. Greear is ready to give Southern Baptists a makeover,” *Religion News Service*.

⁸³ National Association of Evangelicals, “About NAE,” *National Association of Evangelicals*.

Recently, the NAE published similar views to those of SBC President J.D. Greear's remarks concerning politicization. In a winter 2017/2018 article posted on the NAE website, NAE President Leith Anderson confronted the issue of politics coupled with evangelicalism. He wrote:

Most international evangelicals today and throughout history have little or no knowledge of the details of American politics, Republicans, Democrats, Congress, courts or the White House. Most simply, they and we are people of faith who take the Bible seriously and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.⁸⁴

Though he warns that evangelicals should not completely disengage from politics, Anderson adds, "...let's not conflate evangelical identity with political identity."⁸⁵ His article exemplifies evangelical change as its publication, following the 2016 presidential election and before the fallout of the SBC leadership change, coincides with more recent conversations about evangelicalism in America.

Moreover, in January 2018, the NAE published a poll of associated evangelical leaders sitting on the NAE Board of Directors posing the question, "Should evangelicals in America be identified with the person and policies of President Trump?"⁸⁶ 83% of respondents replied with "No" to the question illustrating a telling transition from popular evangelical support for Trump during the election toward independence from the President by church leaders a year into his presidency.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Leith Anderson, "Evangelical ≠ Political," *National Association of Evangelicals*, Winter 2017/18.

⁸⁵ Anderson, "Evangelical ≠ Political," *National Association of Evangelicals*.

⁸⁶ Evangelical Leaders Survey, "Evangelical Leaders Don't Want Partisan Political Identity," *National Association of Evangelicals*, January 2018.

⁸⁷ Evangelical Leaders Survey, "Evangelical Leaders Don't Want Partisan Political Identity," *National Association of Evangelicals*.

Authors contributing to the “Younger Evangelicals” section of the NAE website also directly approach the topic of reaching and engaging Millennials and other generations for the future. Various articles discuss the characteristics of young generations and ways the church can incorporate their strengths to better influence their organization. The NAE’s polling and dialogue, isolating from the historically entwined political associations of evangelicalism and coupled with a similar approach to engaging Millennials, reflects a parallel movement to the SBC. Both organizations are sharing conversations, debates, and internal reflection about the future of their congregations and the way the upcoming American populace views and understands their faith. This demonstrates a concerted effort to respond to generational changes and views in the American landscape and perhaps a direct attempt to engage young Americans isolating from religious affiliation.

Analysis and Discussion

Data collected for Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2 from Pew, PRRI, Gallup, and Barna show a continued decrease in the identification of Americans with major faith groups coupled with an increasing number of religiously unaffiliated. This data supports Wuthnow and Pew Research Center’s observation of declining religious participation in the future based on changes in generational religious identification. The continually increasing disengagement of each generation, most dramatically exhibited by 34 percent of Generation Z with no religious affiliation compared to 13 percent of Boomers at the same age from Figure 1.2, supports the hypothesis that the major institutions of religion in America are in decline and will continue to be in the future. These changes should provoke, while perhaps not immediate concern, at least

further reflection and understanding as major losses in faith group representation will alter the civic, social, and political future landscape.

The Pew data from Figure 1.5 supports the idea that evangelicals have survived well compared to other faith groups and denominations of Christianity. Over time, evangelicals have held consistent representation while Christianity overall, specifically Mainline Protestantism, has weakened. The high number of Millennials and Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated supports the idea that religious influence is changing in the U.S. Barna's study on Generation Z and an increase in Atheism and non-affiliation coupled with their study on barriers to the faith of Millennials and Generation Z points to the impact of social and political differences between these generations and older Americans. If the trend of declining faith affiliation continues in upcoming generations, and it appears it will, religious influence in American society will rapidly shrink as older Americans pass on and fewer and fewer families pass down faith traditions.

The Southern Baptist Convention and National Association of Evangelicals studies serve as evangelical examples of generational replacement and a shift toward purposefully approaching the concerns of upcoming generations. It is a religious response to political and social changes in America. The strong data that shows such substantial change in the religious landscape, particularly the views and leanings of young Americans, is an undeniable fact that Christian denominations must acknowledge. Though evangelicalism has maintained a robust following, the shifts in Mainline Protestantism should serve as a fair warning to evangelical leaders that their resiliency is not without threat. If political association remains a primary issue for upcoming generations, as it appears to be with Millennials and Generation Z, the SBC and NAE would do well to continue to distance their organizations from the partisan marketplace. To

distance from the political marketplace will likely become increasingly difficult as shrinking numbers will put greater pressure on remaining Christians in a growing partisan cultural environment. Faith groups will either choose to willingly move toward young Americans in approaching generational political, social, and moral views, or they will likely experience a continued decline in membership rates.

Conclusion

The implications of understanding the changes in American religion are great. Not only is the topic an important discussion for major faith leaders and congregants, but also political leaders and the greater American populace. Neglecting major losses in religious affiliation has the potential to drastically alter the communal, civic, and moral structure of the nation. For if religion in America is in decline, it is likely to be replaced by something else. The data analyzed in this paper from the last decade, combined with academic literature, supports the hypothesis that America's religious profile is changing rapidly. First, Americans are less likely to affiliate with a particular religion and each successive generation is moving away from any religious identification. The growing unaffiliated ranks will continue to be supplied by those Americans leaving faith groups and, more strongly, by younger Americans who have never subscribed to a particular faith.

Second, the question of the evangelical future is not as variable as other groups. Though Christianity as a whole is clearly in decline, evangelicals have displayed strong resiliency, and data from this study support a stable future. However, Millennials and Generation Z will play a prominent role in either supporting or refuting this finding. Both of these generations trend

toward evangelical disengagement, though not enough recent data exists to clarify this point. Generation Z, mostly teenagers, have yet to solidify their religious identifications for adulthood and certainly, due to their young age, have not produced any voting data to suggest separation or backlash toward religious partisanship. Continued polling of this group will be necessary to observe any changes in evangelical membership as it relates to Millennials and Post-Millennials.

The third question, why younger generations are shifting from faith is the most difficult to answer. Polling of younger generations supports the idea that politically and socially Millennials and Post-Millennials differ from older generations including those with the same religious beliefs. However, many variables may cumulatively cause the departure of young Americans. The SBC and NAE case studies and Barna polling do signal that young parishioners are disgruntled by traditional partisan connections and by the view that Christians are hypocritical, possibly because of discrepancies between their voting habits and religious beliefs. Future studies on the voting habits of secular and religious Millennials and Post-Millennials coupled with their views on socially and politically charged issues such as immigration, gay rights, and gun control could better illustrate a growing rift between generations. Changes in the SBC and NAE are too recent to definitively attribute to a single issue. The future of the SBC under Greear's leadership and the actions of other denominational groups could provide clarity to demographic and generational shifts as well as how religious groups respond to a changing environment.

An April 2017 article published in *The Atlantic*, referenced the concern of a growing culture war between Americans. The author concludes, referencing Kenneth Wald's work, that an emerging movement away from religious affiliation and participation toward secularism in

the wake of the 2016 election will result in increased partisanship and intolerance, of which both sides of the political spectrum will suffer.⁸⁸ It is critical both American religious and secular institutions acknowledge and address these changes, there is more to lose than just our faith.

⁸⁸ Peter Beinart, "Breaking Faith: The culture war over religious morality has faded; in its place is something much worse," *The Atlantic*, April 2017.

Chapter Two

American Political Polarization and Religion

What is changing?

In the early nineteenth century, German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte described the early Christ-followers as unconcerned with terrestrial matters, “Thus the apostles, for example, and the earliest Christians in general, were even in life transported wholly beyond the earth by their belief in heaven; and they renounced the affairs of the world—state, fatherland and nation—so completely that they no longer deemed these worthy of their attention.”⁸⁹ Much has changed since the first church in how religious followers address the doings and direction of the state. The Western, and current American, descendent Church of the early Christian apostles has departed greatly from an eternal focus like those of its ancestors and embraced a more committed and purposeful role in the secular business of the nation and its politics.

⁸⁹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. Gregory Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 100-101.

Today, certain American Christian groups represent a strong political demographic with a unified approach in ensuring their mores are reflected in American society and government. This is most evident in the surety of the evangelical voting bloc, particularly in the 2016 presidential election, where white American evangelicals overwhelmingly supported then-candidate Donald Trump at 81 percent in lock-step and very much concerned with the direction of the nation.⁹⁰ In an increasingly polarized and tribal society, Americans in identifiable groups, political or religious, are ensuring their views are an actionable part of the democratic conversation.

This chapter addresses the relationship between political polarization and religious identification. What does growing partisanship do to religious association in America and how do these two spheres influence one another? Ultimately, this chapter will examine political polarization's effect on religious reorganization or decline cited in the first installment of this project.

Chapter one focused on the changing landscape of American religious affiliation. Conclusively, Americans are shedding traditional religious labels. Though overall American faith groups are in decline, evangelicals—by retaining their followers—and religious “nones” (those with no religious affiliation) are growing. Researchers and academics point to a myriad of reasons for this shift but younger generations leaving the faith prominently cite frustration with faith-based political alignment. Regardless of affiliation voters young and old must confront the social, political, and religious challenges before them in the way that best helps them explain

⁹⁰ Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martinez, “How the faithful voted: A preliminary 2016 analysis,” *Pew Research Center*, November 9, 2016.

the world. If religion, in the context of this study, represents the way one reconciles how things should be, what one cares about, and existential purpose, perhaps Americans are simply trading one type of affiliation for another. This study will explore American voters, both those affiliated with a traditional faith group and those with no affiliation, to determine how politics is affecting religious identity.

As affiliation with traditional faith groups declines and nones grow, politically Americans are ideologically moving further apart. In seven polls conducted between 1994 and 2017, *Pew Research Center* found a widening partisan divide between Americans which accelerated from 2016 to 2017.⁹¹ This study found party affiliation diverging at a greater rate than other social identifiers and greater splits on political views related to government aid, racial discrimination, immigration, and diplomacy than at any other time.⁹² Another Pew study from October 2019, revealed more divisive and negative attitudes toward opposing political party members. It showed 78 percent of members in both the Democrat and Republican parties believe party divisions are growing and 73 percent of those polled believe the two party's disagreements extend beyond policy interests to views on "basic facts" revealing a sharp uptick in polarization since 2016.⁹³ Furthermore, members of opposing parties are more likely than ever to see each other as immoral and less patriotic.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Pew Research Center, "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*, October 5, 2017.

⁹² Pew Research Center, "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

⁹³ Pew Research Center, "Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*, October 10, 2019.

⁹⁴ Pew Research Center, "Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

Adjacent on Pew's website is a publication regarding the aforementioned changes in American religious affiliation. Recent studies show an increasing population of religious nones in the United States. The first chapter cites a 2012 Pew Research study where respondents self-identified with no religious affiliation at 15.3 percent in 2007 and 19.6 percent in 2012 and a 2015 study showing 25.4 percent of Americans identified as evangelical Christian.⁹⁵ In a recently released separate but related poll, Pew found Americans identifying as either atheist, agnostic, or none, rose 9 percent in the general population since 2009.⁹⁶

Given the rising levels of partisan division and religious non-affiliation, perhaps an identifiable relationship exists between these two movements. Two specific groups will be examined to better explore the question. A 2018 General Social Survey (GSS) poll showed nones at 23.1 percent of the population and evangelicals at 22.8 percent revealing a first that nones have closed the gap to evangelicals, the largest faith group in America, in overall size.⁹⁷ If nones numerically equal or surpass evangelicals in representation then their political footprint will be telling in understanding religious and political change. If nones are as homogenous as evangelicals on certain political issues and candidates, and as a voting bloc, this comparison could signify a shift in the way Americans define themselves.

The politically separating environment and the increasing rate of religious disaffiliation are both clear and evidenced factors. Much has been written and studied on these two

⁹⁵ Pew Research Center, "'Nones' on the Rise," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, October 9, 2012 and Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape" *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, May 12, 2015.

⁹⁶ Pew Research Center, "In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, October 17, 2019.

⁹⁷ Samuel Smith, "Religious 'nones' now as big as evangelicals in the US, new data shows," *The Christian Post*, March 20, 2019.

observations; however, it is necessary to determine if and how these occurrences are connected. It is critical to understand the impact on the political and religious future of America given these dynamics. As religious Americans shape the way they vote and determine proper governance, by and through their faith, the rise of the nones and their political voice may fundamentally alter the traditional lens by which religion and politics are understood. Moreover, with greater value placed on political loyalty over religious identification, traditionally religious Americans themselves may also be trading religion for politics as they assign greater importance to political matters and party association than religion. The speed and intensity at which Americans are moving apart politically combined with the loss of religious identity suggests a link and may reveal a change in how the populace sees and explains the world. In its most practical and worldly sense, if religion is a collection of beliefs and purpose to give meaning and direction to life, then it is feasible Americans are finding this more so in their political identities than inside the walls of a church.

Literature Review

Much recent scholarship has addressed the pervasive and observable partisan trend in many facets of American society and government. The 2016 presidential election with its vitriol, though certainly not a single data point, revealed deeply entrenched fractures between both parties and awareness of division in the general electorate. Partisanship and polarization are not synonymous terms as the former corresponds to growing dissonance between parties and the latter to more ideological divergence. However, for this study, the overall growing political

division is used as a whole and more or less equally to denote a gap regardless of a specific party or ideological difference.

In addition to noting a deeper partisan split in the 114th Congress than in any previous Congress over the past 100 years, a recent compilation found evidence of partisan division in political parties, the judiciary, state and federal government, and the executive.⁹⁸ Most germane to this study is the electorate's partisanship and the self-identified none or evangelical voter. Evidence shows American voters are increasingly distancing themselves along the political spectrum. A 2012 study found 91 percent of presidential election voters maintained party lines while only 7 percent voted apart from their registered party, signifying the highest level of partisanship in the poll's 60-year history.⁹⁹ Politically, voters are quickly widening by party and platform. Political Scientist Alan I. Abramowitz writes, "the distributions of ideological positions, policy preferences, and even candidate evaluations have become increasingly polarized with fewer Democrats and Republicans found near the center and more found near the opposing attitudinal poles."¹⁰⁰ Abramowitz adds a key observation and finding that division among the American electorate is not solely ideological but extends to deep cultural, social, and racial differences.¹⁰¹ This may suggest that party assignment or political identification serves as a critical label that Americans use to clearly and easily explain what is most important to them.

⁹⁸ Zachary Courser, Eric Helland, and Kenneth P. Miller, "Introduction," in *Parchment Barriers: Political Polarization and the Limits of Constitutional Order*, ed. Zachary Courser, Eric Helland, and Kenneth P. Miller (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2018) 1, 1-12.

⁹⁹ Alan I. Abramowitz, "The New American Electorate: Partisan, Sorted, and Polarized," in *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, ed. James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 25.

¹⁰⁰ Abramowitz, "The New American Electorate: Partisan, Sorted, and Polarized," in *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, 32-33.

¹⁰¹ Abramowitz, "The New American Electorate: Partisan, Sorted, and Polarized," in *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, 42.

In other words, perhaps it is becoming easier to more accurately and completely describe oneself in terms of a party or political lens than a religious tag.

Countering Abramowitz's findings, Nolan McCarty, in a recently published book, cites various scholars and studies that conclude the mass population diverging politically is a misnomer as the public is simply better sorted into political or partisan camps. McCarty references research findings that Americans have sustained similarly strong views on certain political issues over time but have better aligned these views with others, "along ideological and social identity lines."¹⁰² Whether sorting or actual ideological divergence, researchers have reiterated the matters noted by Abramowitz that separate voters: social, racial, and cultural issues.¹⁰³ Perhaps the rationale or definition matters less to the question at hand than the outcome or effect. Further separation of the public or more sorting will continue to drive Americans into well-defined identities especially if the lines between religious affiliation and social or racial views are blurred or nonexistent.

From a governance standpoint, McCarty suggests the current environment and President Trump's political strategy and rhetoric creates and highlights division among groups and will accelerate sorting potentially leading to government gridlock and public dissatisfaction and distrust in democratic institutions.¹⁰⁴ The growing political gap, coupled with bitter partisanship, will likely result in disastrous effects for social and community solidarity perhaps breaking down some traditional religious affiliations while also stoking and entrenching the political arm of some faith groups.

¹⁰² Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 67.

¹⁰³ McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 59.

¹⁰⁴ McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 166.

Shifting to religious identity, much has been studied and written on the recent trend of the rise of the nones and the reasoning behind Americans leaving their faiths. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell found, in a sweeping study of American religion and politics, young generations were cutting religious ties due to “the association between religion and conservative politics.”¹⁰⁵ Research conducted between 2006 and 2011 reinforced the assumption none growth was due to the mixture of politics and religion and the impact of the Religious Right movement.¹⁰⁶ This explanation for the rise of the nones in the past few years has been echoed by various researchers and academics. Michael Hout and Claude S. Fisher addressed the question directly in a 2002 study which attempted to explain the dramatic doubling of American nones from 7% in 1991 to 14% in 1998.¹⁰⁷ Like Putnam and Campbell, Hout and Fisher cited generational replacement as a reason but found the primary explanation was an aversive reaction to Christian political affiliation with the GOP by moderate Mainline Protestants and lukewarm religious observers.¹⁰⁸ The authors note their findings revealed a distinct trend attributive to the political and religious associations of the 1990s.¹⁰⁹ The key observation at the turn of the century was the relationship between the polarized political environments affecting the traditionally understood boundaries of religious affiliation.

Hout and Fisher’s research also confronts a common misperception that religious nones are largely secular atheists, agnostics, or at least indifferent to religion. They show few nones

¹⁰⁵ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2010), 3.

¹⁰⁶ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 566.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review* 67, (April 2002), 165.

¹⁰⁸ Hout and Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” 168.

¹⁰⁹ Hout and Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” 176.

fall under these labels, most pray and have “opted out” of organized religion while still retaining spiritual practices and views.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, they found no evidence in any part of their study that suggested nones hold no religious beliefs.¹¹¹ One study found, although the growth of the nones may initially appear to point to secularization, only 5% of the general population claims no spiritual belief, far below the percentage of overall American nones.¹¹² The fact that nones retain forms of religiosity while departing organized religion for political purposes may indicate political views are supplanting religious affiliation as the primary American identity. The authors conclude a continued and increasingly polarized political climate will further isolate moderates, embolden the left and right, and institutionalize the left from religious affiliates on the right.¹¹³ Though religion and politics have always intertwined throughout American history, researchers and political scientists have noted a distinct relationship between religious affiliation and the growing partisanship of the American electorate in recent years to support the replacement theory.

In addition to noting the dropout of the “moderate religious middle” Putnam and Campbell found Americans are self-sorting into communities based on political and social values rather than religious connections.¹¹⁴ They show, in comparing various party voters and platforms to traditional religious voters, greater polarization and discord between political parties than religious groups.¹¹⁵ In other words, there was greater disagreement and

¹¹⁰ Hout and Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” 173, 175.

¹¹¹ Hout and Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” 173.

¹¹² Robert Booth Fowler, Laura R. Olson, Allen D. Hertzke, and Kevin R. Den Dulk, *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choices* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014), 311.

¹¹³ Hout and Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” 189.

¹¹⁴ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 5.

¹¹⁵ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 570.

dissonance between competing political parties than between any two faith groups. Moreover, Putnam and Campbell argued the binding agent between partisanship and religious beliefs were two main issues: abortion and same-sex marriage.¹¹⁶ Their findings suggest Americans hold deeper or more entrenched beliefs on certain political issues than any religious principles. With increasingly polar views on more recent inflammatory issues such as climate change and gun control, party separation could mark the transition to political views as the driving social wedge between Americans rather than deeply held religious beliefs or any other identifiable characteristic.

In a more recent article, in part, by David Campbell published in 2018, the authors support this very claim writing the “effect of political orientations on religious and secular characteristics is often stronger than the reverse effect.”¹¹⁷ The contributors reinforce Hout and Fisher’s findings and offer the alignment of religion and politics produces partisanship and feeds polarization forcing conservatives and Republicans further right while Democrats and liberals become more secular and further left as a response.¹¹⁸ A growing section of academic and sociological researchers and scholars is labeling politics as the causal factor for changes in the American religious landscape. This connection and causality are also evident in voting records and characteristics of traditional religious groups. In more recent presidential elections of 2008, 2012, and 2016, religious and non-religious voters split sharply along party lines and

¹¹⁶ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 370.

¹¹⁷David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, John C. Green, and Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo, “Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations,” *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 3, (July 2018), 552.

¹¹⁸ Campbell, Layman, Green, and Sumaktoyo, “Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations,” 564.

voted overwhelmingly in alignment with their group affiliations.¹¹⁹ As Americans over the last thirty years have become more partisan, the way they identify themselves in terms of religious assignment has changed as a result. This change is attributed more so to how Americans view the other party and less in the way they view correct policy practices.¹²⁰ This trend may drive Americans to consider first and foremost their political roots and afterward apply any input from religious association or identification.

Michele Margolis, in her book *From Politics to Pews*, argues partisanship driving religion is the new norm for understanding the relationship between religion and politics in America. She argues the conventional understanding that an individual's religious preference is the reference point for political and party affiliation has been upended. Margolis shows that partisan ideology from an earlier beginning arrests the identity and worldview of American voters and determines how they later interact with and assign to religions.¹²¹ This occurs as younger generations, already steeped in political leanings from their parents and upbringing, enter adulthood and affiliate with a religious community in alignment with their more stable and longer-held partisan ideology. As they age, their core ideology will continue to influence their voting habits, views on issues, and non-religious decisions far into the future much less than the influence of their more recent religious affiliation.¹²²

In addition to younger political generations putting on a religious label at age, religion can also help push politically apathetic voters toward partisan inclinations with less effort.

¹¹⁹ Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 19.

¹²⁰ Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*, 200.

¹²¹ Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*, 3.

¹²² Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*, 3.

Margolis claims a vast majority of Americans care little about politics and are lazy to build individual platforms or cases for strong political stances. Religious group affiliation can offer a short-cut to crafting political positions and can “reduce the costs of forming political decisions” while building a standpoint “without much cognitive effort.”¹²³ Essentially, if the members of a church imply and espouse a particular political view, less politically engaged members quite simply pick up that view to associate with community norms. This produces homogenous voting and greater alignment between a particular political identity and a religious faith group.

Escalating partisanship and the infusion of politics into religion can also influence the internal dynamics of a particular faith group. Partisan identity can grow inside of religious sects. Where traditionally churches may have encapsulated a range of political views, they are transitioning to more entrenched and like-minded political stances creating echo chambers.¹²⁴ The trend of partisanship in both the political sphere and inside of various churches and religious faiths is a self-feeding movement. Entrenchment drives both religious and non-religious Americans into politically compatible camps further exacerbating the partisan divide inside and outside of religious factions. Simply, a splintering of affiliations on either side of the political spectrum is occurring in both religious and non-religious spheres. If partisan ideology and politics now drive the religious identity, of moderates, conservative evangelicals, and liberal nones, how does this change the understanding and theoretical framework of religion in America? If politics is the new religion for all, what does this mean?

¹²³ Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*, 36.

¹²⁴ Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*, 6.

One approach to consider is a long-held framework to describe the blend of religion and politics in America. In 1967 sociologist Robert Bellah introduced to the American context the term *civil religion* as an underlying and foundational American political religion. He defined it as a “set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals”¹²⁵ that reinforced the spiritual destiny of the American government and the unifying conviction of American purpose. Bellah referenced President Lincoln and Kennedy’s use of religious rhetoric in political speeches to illustrate a distinct civil belief that acts in much the same ways as a religious faith to influence the electorate. He defined the spiritualization of politics and the deep communal binding of Americans to the destiny of the American spirit. Though American civil religion represents a uniquely American characteristic and phenomenon, the concept of spiritualizing politics is not limited to democracies alone or the West. Politics as religion has been demonstrated in Bolshevism, Nazism, fascism, and totalitarianism, to a more detrimental and ruinous effect.¹²⁶ Emilio Gentile writes the act of sacralizing politics, in essence, takes “the prerogative to determine the meaning and fundamental aim of human existence for individuals and to the collectivity, at least on this earth.”¹²⁷ In this way, politics supplants religion by becoming an earthly purpose or motivation for life pursuits.

Mark Chaves in explaining the power of religious authority in political society shows control is obtained either by “deliverance from sickness, meaninglessness, poverty, desire, sin, or other undesirable conditions” or by positive promises or offerings.¹²⁸ As Americans diverge

¹²⁵ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1, (Winter 1967), 4.

¹²⁶ Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 45.

¹²⁷ Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, xiv.

¹²⁸ Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority,” *Social Forces*, 72, no. 3, (March 1994), 756.

from each other and imbed their identity in political camps they may be exchanging the terrestrial aims of traditional religious groups for the power in identity, purpose, and worldview of political affiliations. Andrew Sullivan argues the replacement theory of religion for politics in a *New York* magazine article in which he opens, “everyone has a religion” and a practice that dictates the decisions in one’s life.¹²⁹ Sullivan includes non-religious Americans in this trend who profess their faith in some sort of belief in truth independent of traditional religion. He explains the decline of religion in America, and specifically, Christianity, as merely those same feelings and associations transferred to and “expressed by political cults.”¹³⁰ This has caused an escalation in political partisanship as Christianity “tamed” religious expression in the past. Sullivan, a Catholic himself, reasons the rise of liberalism has prompted this void previously filled by Christianity and argues the Christian impact on politics has historically helped tolerate and diffuse disagreement and theological differences in American society.¹³¹

This argument contradicts the work of Margolis and Campbell that partisanship primarily creates division and in turn religious affiliation or non-affiliation. However, Sullivan’s article supports the overarching idea that all Americans search for, accept, and act on a particular belief or goal that explains the world and gives life purpose. When viewed with Margolis’ and Campbell’s work in mind, increasing partisanship and the equally divided political spectrum between leftist nones and conservatively aligned evangelicals may demonstrate politics as religion in the current environment.

¹²⁹ Andrew Sullivan, “America’s New Religions,” *Intelligencer, New York*, December 7, 2018.

¹³⁰ Sullivan, “America’s New Religions,” *New York*.

¹³¹ Sullivan, “America’s New Religions” *New York*.

Robert Bellah's observation of American civil religion was that of a unifying faith in political destiny and collective American identity. At its core, civil religion could be used to tie Americans to one another under God to common goals and belief in the experiment of American democracy. Perhaps the previously understood definition of civil religion is changing to one not by which presidents petition for American unity but toward two distinct civil political religions on the left and right. Each as firmly planted in a political belief to map the way forward for the American government as the other and each as tinged with the characteristics and communal belief of a religious worldview as the other, regardless of religious or non-religious identities. These emerging and ever-diverging religions are best understood or explained as political divisions but carry the power, influence, and commitment to ideals as any major faith group. If politics drive religion, and politics are a religion for the followers of political ideologies, then these two competing civil religions, one right, one left, will act as disruptive rather than amalgamative forces in the American political and social context further isolating Americans from one another.

Methodology

This study utilizes various polling data to better address how political polarization may be affecting trends in religious affiliation. More specifically, religious nones and evangelicals will be key focus groups due to their near-equal representation in the American general population from the previously referenced 2018 GSS poll. These two groups may represent similar blocs on both the liberal and conservative end of the political spectrum in terms of applying social and cultural values and beliefs in their political camps. There is something critically important in

investigating how these two identities, seemingly dissimilar in their religious character, compare and contrast politically. This study will utilize polls, primarily from Pew Research Group, which look at the overall representation of nones and evangelicals in both the Democratic and Republican Parties as well as overall voter registration. The way nones and evangelicals demonstrate their beliefs and core values at the ballot box and in their views on social and cultural issues speaks volumes to understanding if partisanship and politics are becoming a stronger identifier and factor for American identity than religious faith.

Data Presentation

First, it is necessary to explore how polarization and division in both the Republican and Democratic parties have changed over time. Generally, both the Republican and Democratic parties are more demographically split than ever due to separations along racial, socioeconomic status, education level, and generational lines. A recent collaborative study in part compiled by the *Center for American Progress* stated, “the 2016 election was the most demographically divisive election in the past 36 years” with parties more divided than at any other modern time.¹³² Demographic differences alone do not explain partisan differences. A Pew Research study, published in 2017, utilized a ten-topic political value questionnaire to measure ideological differences of voters since 1994. This study found the gap of political values between Republicans and Democrats had separated and grown by over 15 percentage points since the beginning of the study and far outweighed political differences classified by

¹³² Robert Griffin et al. “States of Change: How Demographic Change is Transforming the Republican and Democratic Parties,” *Center for American Progress*, June 2019.

demographics.¹³³ Simply, Americans are more divided along party lines than by race, education, age, or gender.

Given the sharp partisan split as well as demographic differences, it should come as no surprise that changing demographic composition reflects religious compositional changes as well. A stronger shift or change over time in this category could show religious affiliation, or lack thereof, as a greater force for political assignment and affect inside each party.

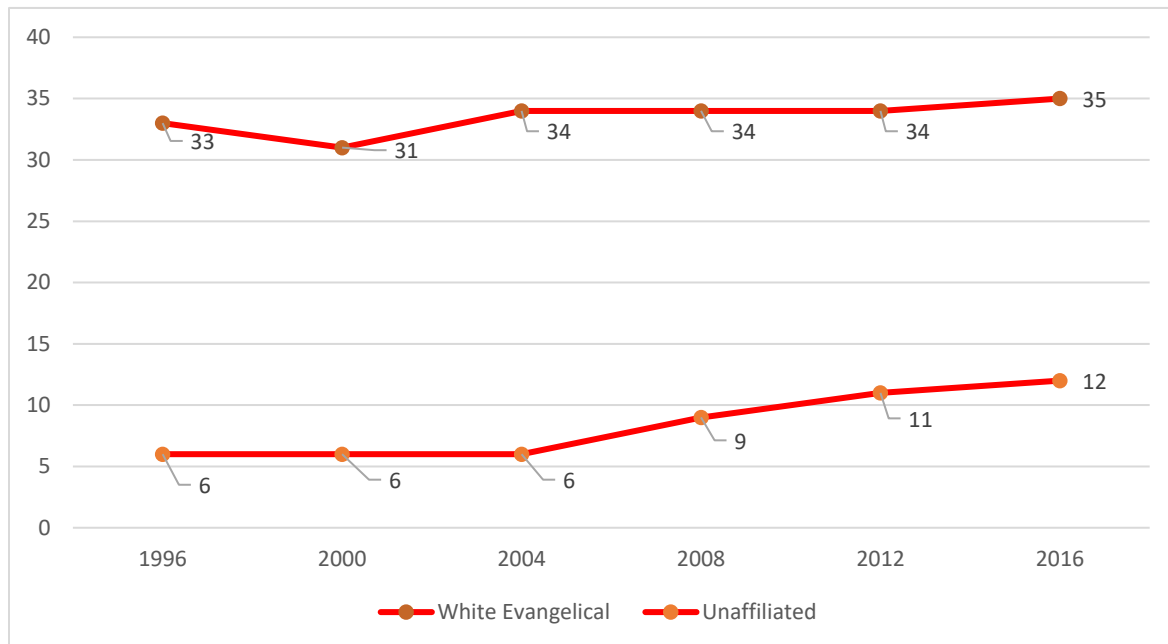
Evangelicals, Nones, and the Republican Party

Pew's expansive study on party identification over 24 years, in addition to other organizational trends, provides a critical look at the changing nature of the parties due to religious association. This study included 253 total surveys of over 340,000 respondents over two decades measuring various aspects of individual identity to party affiliation.¹³⁴

¹³³ Pew Research Center, "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*, October 5, 2017

¹³⁴ Pew Research Center, "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*, September 13, 2016.

Figure 2.1—Percentage of Republican or Republican-Leaning Voters by Religious Affiliation (1996-2016)



Source: Pew Research Center. Graph compiled by the author.

Turning first to the Republican Party, white evangelical Protestants from Figure 2.1, comprise roughly a third of the party and grew four points to 35 percent from 2000 to 2016.¹³⁵

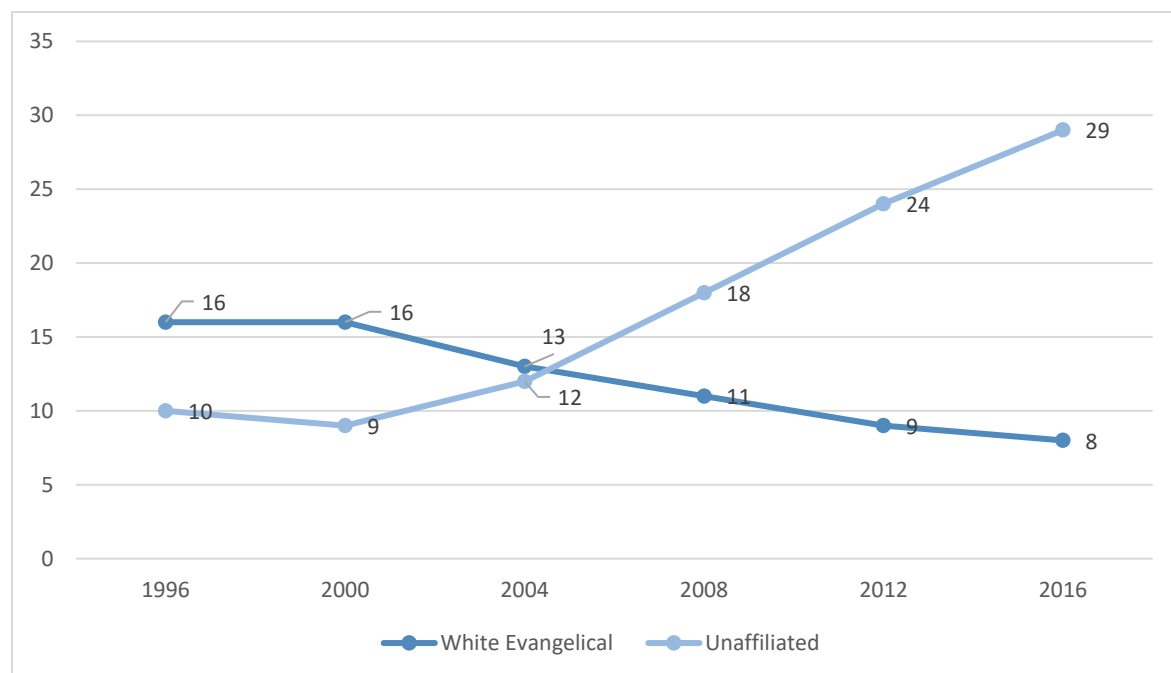
Evangelicals, the most stable and relied upon affiliation, inside of the GOP never dipped below 30 percent since Pew began its study. Their consistency in the Party and their slight growth over time shows—given the dramatic rise of unaffiliated voters in recent years—evangelicals are growing inside of the Republican Party just by remaining solid in a more sorted and polarized environment. Pew’s study evidentially supports the idea that white evangelicals are a relied upon and foundational identity of the Republican Party and are growing in number and influence.

¹³⁵ Pew Research Center, “The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart,” *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

In congruence with the overall rise of religious nones in the general population, nones have also gained some ground inside the Republican Party. Since 2004, nones doubled their footprint in the Party from six to 12 percent by 2016.¹³⁶ At first glance, none growth appears as foothold gaining inside the Party, but given the total expansion of nones in the political environment and balanced against the results in the Democratic Party, this is more likely attributed to an overall reduction of faith group assignment in the American voting population. Nones are growing in both parties but the rate of growth in the Democratic Party reveals a new liberal voting bloc strength reflective of evangelical Protestantism’s hold inside of the GOP.

Evangelicals, Nones, and the Democratic Party

Figure 2.2—Percentage of Democratic or Democratic-Leaning Voters by Religious Affiliation (1996-2016)



Source: Pew Research Center. Graph compiled by the author.

¹³⁶ Pew Research Center, “The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart,” *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

Figure 2.2 shows a clear transition where the percentage of nones in the Democratic Party composition increases and eclipses the reducing number of white evangelical Protestants over time indicating more dramatic change inside of the Democratic Party than the Republican Party from Figure 2.1. This is most evident between 2000 and 2008 as nones double, in two election cycles, from nine percent of the Democratic Party to 18 percent in 2008.¹³⁷ This growth continues at a similar rate as nones reach their highest level in 2016 representing over a quarter of all registered Democratic voters.¹³⁸

The rise of nones in the Democratic Party reflects a similar representation of evangelicals, at least in terms of size and makeup, in the Republican Party. Meanwhile, since 1996 the white evangelical population of the Democratic Party halved by 2016 at only eight percent, the second-lowest population of the eight faith affiliations included in the surveys.¹³⁹ In the same reflective manner, white evangelical Protestants as part of the Democratic Party at eight percent are less than five percentage points from the population of nones inside of the GOP at 12 percent in 2016 from Figure 2.1. The dramatic rise of nones in the Democratic Party necessitates the question; where are nones coming from? The answer may be found in the trending representation of Catholics and Mainline Protestants inside of the parties.

Pew Research, in the same study, showed white Catholics in the Republican Party dropped only two percentage points from 20 to 18 in the ten-year window.¹⁴⁰ Catholics, like

¹³⁷ Pew Research Center, "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

¹³⁸ Pew Research Center, "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

¹³⁹ Pew Research Center, "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

¹⁴⁰ Pew Research Center, "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

evangelical Protestants, have held a strong albeit smaller representation inside of the Republican Party over time. White Catholics made up 22 percent of the Democratic Party in 1996, that percentage split in half to 10 percent by 2016 suggesting previous Catholic affiliates may have become nones inside of the Party but likely not from the Republican ranks.¹⁴¹

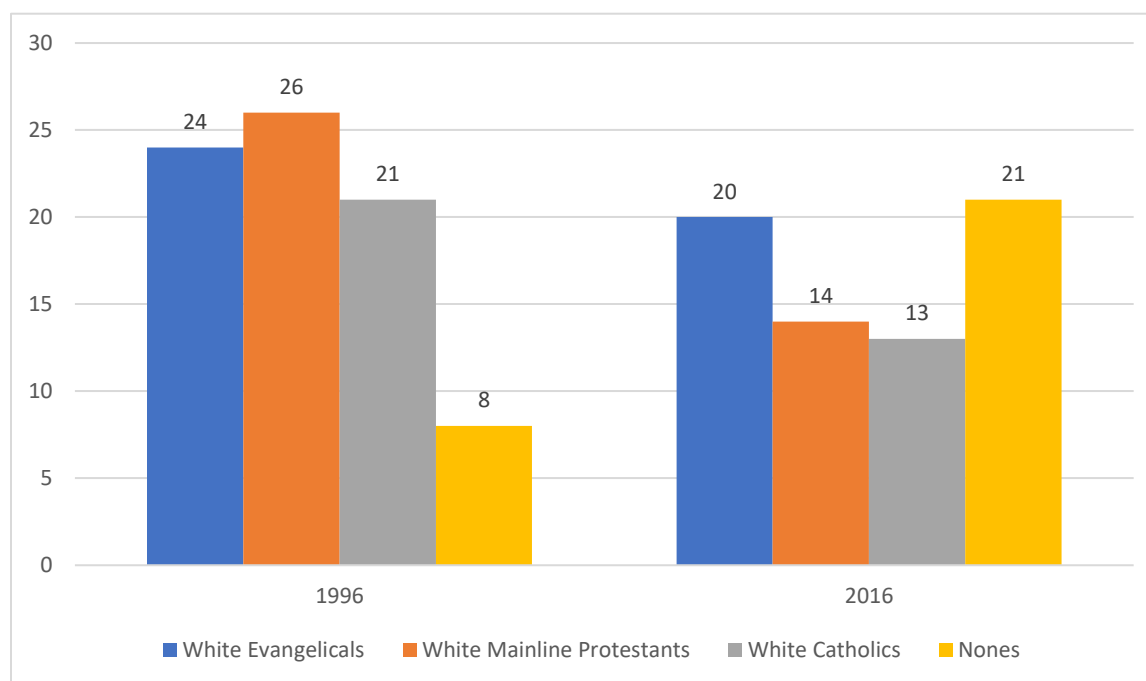
Mainline Protestants, as a defined faith, represent the most fluid group and could be the main supplier and explanation for greater numbers of nones. Like Catholic Democrats, white Mainline Protestants went from a quarter of the party in 1996 to only 11 percent in 2016.¹⁴² On the Republican side of the aisle, white Mainline Protestants have continued to shrink over time from 29 percent of the Party to only 17 percent in the measured decade.¹⁴³ This data means many Mainline Protestants inside of the Democratic Party have dropped their religious identity and likely rebranded as nones. Furthermore, given their dramatic reduction inside of the Republican Party, Mainline Protestants are also likely becoming Democrats and perhaps also losing their faith tag.

¹⁴¹ Pew Research Center, "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

¹⁴² Pew Research Center, "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

¹⁴³ Pew Research Center, "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart," *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

Figure 2.3—Percentage of Registered Voters by Faith Affiliation (1996, 2016)



Source: Pew Research Center. Graph compiled by the author.

Overall voter representation by faith group also indicates a change in the electorate and how religion and politics interact. In Pew’s study, since 1996, white evangelicals as a voting base have maintained their political presence as a group only dipping four percentage points by 2016.¹⁴⁴ White Mainline Protestants and White Catholics, two traditionally large voting faith groups, experienced significant decreases in voter registration in a decade losing 12 and 8 points respectively, three times and two times the decline of evangelicals.¹⁴⁵ The most dramatic delta belongs to the increase in voters identifying as religious nones which more than doubled from eight percent in 2006 to 21 percent in 2016.¹⁴⁶ Based on this data, it is clear Catholics and

¹⁴⁴ Pew Research Center, “The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart,” *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

¹⁴⁵ Pew Research Center, “The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart,” *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

¹⁴⁶ Pew Research Center, “The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart,” *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*.

Mainline Protestants are either shrinking in number as faith groups in America and becoming less politically engaged, or are shifting their affiliation to the none category.

Faith Group Polarization

In comparing the evangelical and none categories within the two parties, are these groups separating ideologically on the political spectrum? Are evangelicals driving Republicans right toward conservatism while nones drive the Democratic Party left? Recent studies suggest the more politically liberal the more likely to have no religious affiliation. Furthermore, while moving right on the spectrum, the number of nones decreases with each checkpoint, meaning the more conservative, the more religiously affiliated.¹⁴⁷ Using exit poll data from the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections, Pew observed religious none support for the Democratic candidate grew with each election and reached 75 percent in 2008.¹⁴⁸ From Pew's comprehensive Religious Landscape Study, politically conservative evangelicals had become more conservative in their views on abortion and homosexuality during the 2000s while nones had become more liberal on the same issues.¹⁴⁹ Though this may at first glance indicate these groups are pushing the extremes of each party, it must be noted that generally Americans and the parties themselves have moved further left and right over time.

In a recent Gallup study on the Democratic Party, polling showed the Party as a whole, as well as all sub-demographics, has become more liberal on various issues over the past two

¹⁴⁷ Ameilia Thomson-DeVeaux and Daniel Cox, "The Christian Right Is Helping Drive Liberals Away From Religion," *FiveThirtyEight*, September 18, 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Pew Research Center, "'Nones' on the Rise," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, October 9, 2012.

¹⁴⁹ Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, May 12, 2015.

decades.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the Republican Party is more sharply conservative than it was in the 1970s. Data pulled from a General Social Survey showed self-identified Republicans placed themselves on a 0 to 100 increasing scale of conservatism just above 60 percent in 1976, in the past decade that percentage passed 70 percent.¹⁵¹ Considering previously noted polarization and general ideological shifts toward the ends of the political spectrum for both parties, neither evangelicals are not solely to blame for temperature changes in party views. While the parties separate and the partisan gap grows, both religious and non-religious factions inside the parties are accountable for the shift.

Analysis and Discussion

Pew Research leads data collection and analysis on the study of religion and politics in the modern era. Data collected from their multiple expansive studies lends clarity to this subject. Figure 2.1 shows the evangelical demographic has held strong inside the Republican Party which continues to move right and away from the Democratic Party. Evangelicals remain not only an integral—but perhaps the strongest—conservative demographic and known commodity in the Republican Party. Because they have remained so stable amidst movement of other demographic groups over time, evangelicals have grown their numbers, clout, and influence in the Party and represent a coherent political voting bloc. Evangelical stability in voter registration also strongly reinforces this claim from the data displayed in Figure 2.3. Due to evangelical staying power in the GOP during other Christian reassignment, this fact likely

¹⁵⁰ Lydia Saad, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Megan Brennan, “Understanding Shifts in Democratic Party Ideology,” *Gallup*, February 19, 2019.

¹⁵¹ Perry Bacon Jr., “The Republican Party Has Changed Dramatically Since George H.W. Bush Ran It,” *FiveThirtyEight*, December 1, 2018.

means evangelicals will increasingly align themselves with and interact more in Republican politics as the wave of religious decline approaches their pews.

In contrast, in terms of faith group representation, the Democratic Party has experienced greater variability than the Republican Party. The dramatic uptick in the number of nones in one decade from 10 to 29 percent, indicated in Figure 2.2, illustrates this point. Considering the reduction in voter registration of Mainline Protestants and Catholics from Figure 2.3 combined with the sharp uptick of registered nones, these two Christian groups are losing their faith but retaining political influence as nones in the Democratic Party. This data is supportive of Hout and Fisher's thesis that more politically liberal or centrist Christians are dropping their religious affiliation in response to the evangelical unification with the Republican Party and conservative politics. As these trends continue, more moderate Christians will likely become nones leading to an entrenching of staunch evangelicals on the right and ongoing growth of secular nones in the Democratic Party.

Conclusion

Broadly, this study shows and observes major shifts in religious affiliation and its relation to the American political landscape. The relationship between politics and religion is changing as faith group population decline and political polarization interact. However, exactly how these two subjects impact one another is less clear but the presented data does provide some insight. Of all data analyzed in this paper, most applicable to the research question is the movement of white Mainline Protestants and white Catholics. These groups are most likely a supplier of nones in the Democratic Party and represent the most observable movement in

terms of political affiliation and religious identification. This study, with more recent polling data, seemingly supports Hout and Fisher's thesis, as well as others (Campbell, Putnam, and to an extent Margolis) in the literature review, that the rise of nones is an aversion to evangelical alignment with an increasingly conservative Republican Party. Given greater polarization, in the parties, the data in this paper shows prior Mainline Protestants and Catholics, likely political moderates or centrists, are reassigning as nones and Democrats while the presence of evangelical Christians in a more politically conservative Republican Party continues to build. While the parties and Americans become more polarized religious assignment is being altered.

More generally, the original question of exactly how partisanship explains religious affiliation or religious affiliation explains partisanship is too complicated to determine with the data from this study. It becomes a chicken or the egg dilemma to definitively state how one drives the other. However, research from the literature review is clear that politics are more acceptably understood as the current driver of religion or lack thereof. Further, as religion declines and polarization increases, both political parties are experiencing dramatic internal shifts. As nones become more Democratic and evangelicals become more Republican it is increasingly difficult to separate the identities. In other words, has the term "evangelical" become so fused to the Republican Party that it is for political and spiritual purposes the same? If America is entering an era of a new of type civil religion, as described by Robert Bellah, is it too early and too complex to tell? The question of how Americans identify themselves, however, is critical to assessing the future outlook of American faith and politics, though it cannot be definitively answered in this project.

Additional studies should be conducted focusing on how Americans identify themselves concerning politics or religion, their overall worldview that shapes their beliefs and actions, and how politics and religion play a role in their daily lives. Studies on American social media activity and media consumption, classified as either religious or political, may help answer this question. Polling which separates more effectively nones and other religious labels and their political views would also bring clarity to this question and help assess if religious voters or secular voters are pushing the parties to the ends of the ideological spectrum.

The welding together of religion and politics is an occurrence some religious leaders and generally, most Americans, find worrisome. Timothy Keller, a prominent and influential evangelical leader, pastor, and author, on the subject of partisanship and Christianity, writes that many American Christians are more influenced by political content online through social media and other platforms than by Scripture and time in communal worship. He explains:

The way I have put it is that faith is often subordinated to partisan politics and political ideology, with the latter being the prism through which too many Christians interpret the former. Too many Christians are characterized by their tribal commitments, rather than an understanding of justice and human teleology.¹⁵²

It appears, from a religious perspective, the inseparable identity of a political Christian risks Christian nature itself.

Americans in general desire religion to be an integral part of American life but still be restrained by appropriate political separation. A recent Pew poll reported 55 percent of Americans believe religion does more good than harm in society while only 20 percent believe

¹⁵² Peter Wehner, "The Moral Universe of Timothy Keller," *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2019.

it harms society.¹⁵³ Meanwhile, 63 percent want politics separate from religion while 76 percent believe churches should not favor certain political candidates.¹⁵⁴ The question of effect and how politics may be driving, or perhaps replacing, religious identity is of fundamental importance. At risk is the traditional practice of American church and state separation which could produce long-term threats to the main mission of major American faith groups and American governance.

¹⁵³ Pew Research Center, "Americans Have Positive Views About Religion's Role in Society, but Want It Out of Politics," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, November 15, 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Pew Research Center, "Americans Have Positive Views About Religion's Role in Society, but Want It Out of Politics," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*.

Chapter Three

Politics as Faith

A New American Civil Religion

On the evening of June 1, 2020, President Trump performed arguably the strongest political act, bathed in religious symbolism, of his presidency. In brashness, unpredictability, and magnitude of response, it stands to markedly define his time in office. The scene in Washington D.C. after three consecutive days of protests following the death of George Floyd presented a complex environment of tension with many players including multiple law enforcement agencies, hundreds of protesters, and national discord surrounding racial injustice.

It was in this environment, after proclaiming the importance of “law and order” in a nationally televised speech, that the President made his way toward Lafayette Square along a route recently cleared by law enforcement using pepper balls and smoke. At the front steps of the St. John’s Episcopal Church, of which the basement was burned by protesters the night before, Ivanka Trump handed the President a Bible which he held high in his hand for

photographs.¹⁵⁵ At a time of national social unrest and worldwide pandemic, the event was catalytic and prompted immediate and overwhelming media attention, editorials, and discourse regarding civil-military relations, the appropriate use of law enforcement, First Amendment protections, and the intersection of religion and politics.

Some have written the Trump Bible photo-op was a calculated act designed to reassure his base, evangelicals in particular, of his commitment to their interests.¹⁵⁶ This explanation seems increasingly accurate given the Defense Secretary's subsequent admission that he was unaware of the walk's endpoint and purpose and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs' mea culpa for appearing in the photo-op event.¹⁵⁷

This project has continued to reference an overarching statistic that Trump carried 81% of the white evangelical vote in the 2016 presidential election. The continued strong evangelical defense of Trump has been difficult for academics, pundits, and religious observers to fully explain given his marital history, business tactics, posture toward opponents and speech, and lack of familiarity or observance of Christian mores. On the campaign trail, the *Access Hollywood* revelation, Trump's reference to "Two Corinthians," and his statements that he doesn't need to ask for forgiveness from God contrasted starkly with deeply held evangelical beliefs. During the St. John's Episcopal Church photograph, a reporter asked if the Bible Trump was holding up was his personal Bible, the President replied, "It's a Bible."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Karl Gelles, Veronica Bravo, and George Petras, "How Police pushed aside protesters ahead of Trump's controversial church photo," *USA Today*, June 11, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ McKay Coppins, "The Christians Who Loved Trump's Stunt," *The Atlantic*, June 2, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Mark T. Esper, "Secretary of Defense Esper Addresses Reporters Regarding Civil Unrest," US Dept of Defense, Transcript, June 3, 2020 and Tom Bowman, "Gen. Mark Milley Apologizes for Appearing in a Photo-Op with President Trump," *NPR*, June 11, 2020.

¹⁵⁸ McKay Coppins, "The Christians Who Loved Trump's Stunt," *The Atlantic*.

Trump has continued to rely heavily on the unwavering and dependable bloc of evangelical voters. He has earned a faithful following, in a distinctly different way than previous politicians, by shrouding himself in religious overtones while defying personal biblical practices. The St. John's Bible photo presents a crucial reflection point and perhaps Trump's height of politics catered to and fused with religion. Evangelical Christians proclaim the authoritative power of Scripture, the same Bible held up by Trump, as a foundational tenet. President Trump's photo-op at a time of civil unrest regarding racial inequality could serve as a starkly drawn line between observing religious evangelicals and political evangelicals. Is Trump's popularity with evangelicals indicative of a greater American shift toward political priorities and power? Are Americans replacing their once traditional spiritual affiliations with political assignments and beliefs? This singular event may signal the context of the changing landscape of politics and religion in America. Given the findings in previous chapters of the strength and rise of the evangelical community in the Republican Party, the rise of the nones and alignment with the Democratic Party, and the coupling of both with the overall increase of polarization, this reflection point could show how politics is replacing or outpacing traditional religion.

While much ink has been spilled on attempting to explain why so many evangelicals voted for and continue to defend Trump, this chapter aims to explore the possibility of the rise and evolution of civil religion introduced in the previous chapter. Is the outcome or effect of declining traditional religious affiliation with greater separation on the political spectrum two distinct and competing civil religions? In other words, are Americans replacing spiritual faiths with a type of politically focused religion? Perhaps a religion that is civil or secular in purpose that seeks to plant a particular political worldview in government, one on the left or one on the

right. Further, a possible schism between evangelicals on supporting Trump could reveal two forms of evangelicalism; one that prioritizes political power and assigns to civil religion and one that prioritizes traditional religious beliefs over political wins.

Chapter two referenced sociologist Robert Bellah's 1967 observance of a unique American Civil Religion (ACR) that served as a unifying phenomenon upholding and framing American ideals in the language of Judeo-Christianity. This civil religion provided a bonding identity to various groups of Americans for the common cause of patriotic support for American values. This project diverges from Bellah's traditional definition of a unifying force by asking if civil religion is or has become a political worldview related to religion in the way that it gives purpose to the individual life through collective effort. An effort to direct America in the way it should be. By this definition, both left and right civil religions provide meaning and significance for their followers that require allegiance to beliefs (political platforms or issues) and little leniency for those who do not strictly follow the core tenets. As the traditional religious beliefs of certain faith groups or denominations previously provided common identity and exclusivity, political tribes or civil religions now do the same.

If this is true, the implications could unravel the traditional understanding of how faith interacts with politics. Two competing, and perhaps growing, civil religions could have the power to further divide Americans into tribal camps leaving little common ground in the middle. In this sense, Bellah's description of a unifying force may have evolved into a divisive one that combines the power of both political and religious fault lines with an outcome sure to harm American solidarity.

Literature Review

Though the theory of civil religion far preceded Robert Bellah's essay—the term has roots in Rousseau and Roman citizenry—Bellah helped shape the concept for the American experience and placed it into professional and academic consideration. He focused on its social power to invoke unity which is why his article opened with a nod to Kennedy's inaugural address. Presidential inaugurations, particularly those following a change of party control, are ripe environments for the president to unify the nation after an election cycle in a path forward that includes all Americans. A blend of religious sentiment, pointing to the roots of the American founding under a Supreme being, with the stated ideals of the founding documents provides power and leverage to bring together the nation. Philip Gorski, a Yale University professor and student of Bellah's, has noted Bellah defined ACR as a meshing of religious narrative and terminology with American ideals and values influenced by the Enlightenment. Gorski writes later Bellah became perhaps discouraged with the theory in practice calling it an "empty and broken shell."¹⁵⁹

This could be explained by cultural fracturing amidst the civil rights era and the Vietnam experience that greatly divided Americans. For this reason and others, ACR has been difficult to identify and define and has been described as episodic or evolutionary over time. For this work, it is necessary to attempt to build coherent framing that helps to identify and then measure if civil religion is forming into two competing political beliefs. Based on historical and present ambiguity surrounding ACR and opinions on exactly what it entails, this is no easy task.

¹⁵⁹ Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), xvii.

Historically, civil religion has come in and out of focus in academia and scholarship. Soon after Bellah's essay in the late 1960s, civil religion became a sociological topic that garnered much interest and study. Sociologists, in particular, attempted to identify, test, and measure the theory of civil religion. In 1972 Michael Thomas and Charles Flippen published their findings of a study designed to test Bellah's theory. Their model focused on analyzing published editorials in various newspapers following the Honor America Day rally held on July 4th, 1970 in downtown Washington D.C. They posited the rally, which featured recorded comments by President Nixon and an opening speech by evangelist Billy Graham, would result in key terms or mentions of Bellah's hypothesis being published in the subsequent papers.¹⁶⁰ Thomas and Flippen sought to match similar phraseology in editorials following a ripe event for ACR to Bellah's description of civil religion. Ultimately, they were able to find no empirical evidence to support Bellah's claim of ACR but they also concluded their method utilized indirect testing, and more study would be needed before "any thesis of civil religion can be accepted."¹⁶¹ Their study, though perhaps unsophisticated by today's standards, illustrates the inherent difficulty in evaluating the civil religion theory.

Four years after the Honor America Day study was published, another Sociologist Ronald Wimberly, among others, published findings on an experimental questionnaire designed to test for ACR. A common theme to Thomas and Flippen's work was Billy Graham. Assuming an evangelist crusade would suit as a strong testing environment for civil religion, Wimberly found support for Bellah's theory and concluded among crusade attendees civil religion was

¹⁶⁰ Michael Thomas and Charles Flippen, "American Civil Religion: An Empirical Study," *Social Forces* 51, no. 2 (December 1972).

¹⁶¹ Michael Thomas and Charles Flippen, "American Civil Religion: An Empirical Study," *Social Forces*, 224-225.

identifiable and distinct from religion yet also correlated to it.¹⁶² Wimberly expanded his experiment in 1972 in the form of a questionnaire given to 574 North Carolinians that included religious observers, those with political affiliations, and people that demonstrated little to no commitment to religion or politics.¹⁶³ Posed statements were designed to mix political and religious themes to measure ACR like, “We should respect a President’s authority since his authority is from God” and “To me, the flag of the United States is sacred.”¹⁶⁴

Wimberly found similar results to the initial crusade attendee group with the more religiously and politically diverse group from North Carolina. His study included empirical support that civil religion “exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches.”¹⁶⁵ The study revealed two interesting points. First, civil religion was more distinguishable in a religious or church community than in the general population, and second, civil religion was more strongly associated with political conservatism.¹⁶⁶ Civil religion and the connection to conservatism is a byproduct of both camps typically believing in some supreme being. For the current hypothesis of a potentially growing civil religion on both the left and right, this is an important consideration—as previous chapters have shown—although religious nones include agnostics and atheists, many new nones hold some belief in God. Further, this finding corresponds to Bellah’s traditional definition of civil religion as unifying.

In 1979, Ronald Wimberly followed the three civil religion measurement studies with an assessment of accuracy and reliability in testing the civil religion theory. This was due to the

¹⁶² Ronald C. Wimberly, “Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis,” *Sociological Analysis* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1976), 342.

¹⁶³ Wimberly, “Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis,” *Sociological Analysis* 37, 343.

¹⁶⁴ Wimberly, “Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis,” *Sociological Analysis* 37, 343.

¹⁶⁵ Wimberly, “Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis,” *Sociological Analysis* 37, 343.

¹⁶⁶ Wimberly, “Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis,” *Sociological Analysis* 37, 350.

inherent difficulty in defining civil religion. Wimberly sought to ensure the previous studies were in fact properly testing for ACR and not some other type of often conflated social or political themes. He concluded the studies did measure a single dimension of civil religion lending credibility to the techniques and model of the previous findings.¹⁶⁷ Wimberly's studies remain perhaps the only empirical and dedicated assessments of ACR in academia. In the context of the current environment of declining religious affiliation and growing partisanship, it is crucial to recognize Wimberly's work and relate it to the underrepresented study of civil religion today.

To this point, little literature or discussion of civil religion existed after the first decade following publication of Bellah's essay. Not until the late 1980s did Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist who had worked with Bellah at UC Berkeley, articulate the possibility that civil religion could be two distinct representations of political ideology. Wuthnow introduced the idea in a 1988 publication of a biblical tradition civil religion and a separate one of political enlightenment. He named them simply the conservative and liberal civil religions.¹⁶⁸ Wuthnow explained the conservative side relies on the foundation that America was formed by Judeo-Christian values, relayed by the framers, and sanctioned by God. Contrasting, the liberal civil religion places a greater emphasis on human rights, justice, and the spread of these values to all humankind, not just America.¹⁶⁹ While the conservative civil religion tends to justify America's economy, decisions, and policy in terms of holy sanctioning, liberal civil religion holds greater

¹⁶⁷ Ronald C. Wimberly, "Continuity in the Measurement of Civil Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1979).

¹⁶⁸ Robert Wuthnow, "Divided We Fall: America's Two Civil Religions," *The Christian Century* 105, April 20, 1988.

¹⁶⁹ Wuthnow, "Divided We Fall: America's Two Civil Religions," *The Christian Century*.

skepticism for American interests and prominence in the world. Departing from Bellah's traditional unifying theory, Wuthnow notes two civil religions opposingly "portray[s] a divine order of things, giving us a sense of worth and direction in relation to ultimate purposes."¹⁷⁰

This work argues Wuthnow's concept of two competing ACRs—more than thirty years later—has only intensified in scope and applicability as Americans have diverged politically and largely thrown off their traditional religious labels. Wimberly observed in the 1970s that civil religion was independent of both church and politics. Though the two civil religions may remain separate from traditional or spiritual faith, they are likely morphing into political faith.

The current climate suggests a struggle where conservative civil religion seeks to prove and hold onto the idea that whatever America does must and will fall under its prophetic and ordained founding mission. At all costs and regardless of any missteps that may have misaligned with Biblical commands it seeks to remind above all that America is a chosen state. On the other hand, the liberal civil religion seeks to distance itself from the Biblical shrouding of Judeo-Christianity but pays credence to a greater power, perhaps the state, that promotes the spread of Enlightenment-inspired humanity to all Americans in a universalist language. The ambiguity and power of civil religion have made the theory profitable and translatable to both the right and left. Both rely on a similar calling of higher purpose and power but in diverging practical politics. In the increasingly polar political climate, both religions find power and influence at the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. As polarization grows, it becomes

¹⁷⁰ Wuthnow, "Divided We Fall: America's Two Civil Religions," *The Christian Century*.

more beneficial for each to attract followers or converts on the extreme ends to consolidate greater power for their cause.

Wuthnow's conservative and liberal civil religion theory did receive some support following publication, at least in sociological circles. In 1989, sociology professor James Mathisen discussed left and right civil religions as "remarkably similar" to Bellah's definition but represented two visions, "one emphasizing the uniqueness of American experience and the other reinterpreting that experience in the international."¹⁷¹ Mathisen also observed four distinct phases of the history of civil religion and noted the last phase as a "wane of ACR discussion leading up to 1988."¹⁷² He found ACR to be "resilient, episodic, and dualistic" and wrote, "It continues to offer more than one vision of American history and experience that Americans never may perceive with a single eye."¹⁷³ Herein lies the flexibility of ACR to be utilized as a political capital movement. A strength Bellah saw in ACR was its broad definition and ability to bring various types of Americans with different views of what America should be together in a single patriotic identity. Today, that same broadness in definition makes ACR particularly attractive for two separate ideologies to champion. It rings true to both camps and general and powerful enough to promote conservative and liberal interests.

Following along the life cycle of ACR a four-scholar forum submitted their understanding of civil religion to a journal in 1994. By the mid-1990s civil religion continued to be explored as a

¹⁷¹ James A. Mathisen, "Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion? (Thematic Issue: a Durkheimian Miscellany)," *Sociological Analysis* 50, no. 2 (July 1, 1989), 140.

¹⁷² Mathisen, "Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion? (Thematic Issue: a Durkheimian Miscellany)," *Sociological Analysis*, 130.

¹⁷³ Mathisen, "Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion? (Thematic Issue: a Durkheimian Miscellany)," *Sociological Analysis*, 140.

concept but this period also demonstrates a fading focus on civil religion. In response to the lull since 1980, Phillip Hammond offered, “a first explanation for that decline might be the conceptual fog that has surrounded it from the beginning.”¹⁷⁴ Mathisen’s view of ACR’s episodic nature combined with the waxing and waning presence of ACR throughout the late 20th century has made getting a clear read on ACR difficult. This ambiguity, in all likelihood, assists actors in utilizing the power of civil religion for political purposes. In the same forum, Jonathan Sarna referenced Wuthnow’s theory of competing civil religions writing that viewing ACR only through Bellah’s idea of a unifying force is to “distort the story.”¹⁷⁵ He continued that, “divisive attempts by various segments of American society to forge a civil religion in their own image is, unfortunately, no less a part of the story.”¹⁷⁶

The ability to leverage civil religion for a particular purpose was something Hammond called it’s “engineering potential.” Hammond astutely noted a lack of specific doctrine in ACR makes it more agreeable to groups than traditional religions since its mission relates more generally to “good society.”¹⁷⁷ In other words, this inherent vagueness as noted earlier makes ACR well-suited to craft into a rallying cry for a particular worldview. Today, this seems directly exemplified in President Trump’s campaign tactic of wrapping nationalist views or

¹⁷⁴ Phillip E. Hammond, Amanda Porterfield, James G. Moseley, and Jonathan D. Sarna, “Forum: American Civil Religion Revisited,” *Religion and American Culture* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1994), 2.

¹⁷⁵ Hammond, Amanda Porterfield, James G. Moseley, and Jonathan D. Sarna, “Forum: American Civil Religion Revisited,” *Religion and American Culture*, 22.

¹⁷⁶ Hammond, Amanda Porterfield, James G. Moseley, and Jonathan D. Sarna, “Forum: American Civil Religion Revisited,” *Religion and American Culture*, 22.

¹⁷⁷ Hammond, Amanda Porterfield, James G. Moseley, and Jonathan D. Sarna, “Forum: American Civil Religion Revisited,” *Religion and American Culture*, 5.

administration agendas in patriotic civil religion. This provides legitimacy to particular political views and in this case, relies on the historical power of civil religion to garner support.

There are a few ways to explain the rise and success of Trump's base popularity and support from a civil religious perspective. The first, which depends on the traditional Bellah definition, regards the total loss of American unity typically utilized by previous presidents. It is in this sense that John D. Carlson published his 2017 essay, "Losing Our Civil Religion." Carlson, who notes both George W. Bush and Barack Obama relied on the cohesive power of civil religion, argues Trump is the "greatest threat to American civil religion."¹⁷⁸ Carlson, in the tradition of Bellah, sees the purpose of ACR as "a model for forging consensus based upon founding principles that transcend differences in ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and political party."¹⁷⁹ In Carlson's opinion, Trump has created a system that has turned its back on the unifying power of civil religion and instead catered his rhetoric and actions to serve an exclusive American constituency, his base, arguably older white evangelicals.

For some, Trump has simply—building on the perspective of Wuthnow's two competing civil religions—retooled traditional ACR to meet his specific objectives and worldview. Another opinion piece from 2017, authored by Benjamin Marcus, argues the propensity of civil religion to be used as an inclusive or exclusive political tool. Marcus notes that while ACR has enough space to permit various viewpoints, identities, and disagreements, Trump has stoked the vices of ACR by drawing lines between Americans, claiming true believers warrant inclusion only by

¹⁷⁸ John D. Carlson, "Losing Our Civil Religion," *Religion and Politics*, September 26, 2017.

¹⁷⁹ Carlson, "Losing Our Civil Religion," *Religion and Politics*.

loyalty to his views.¹⁸⁰ Trump has capitalized on the power of civil religion by welding his political ideology and following to ACR identity. In this sense, the inclusivity of civil religion is being redefined to only include specific platform beliefs. From here, one can easily frame political opponents as un-American apostates.

Today, perhaps the leading scholar on ACR and its role in the current climate is Philip Gorski. In 2017, Gorski published a sweeping book on the history of ACR that argues the importance of reinstating ACR as a unifying force in a divided age. Gorski defines growing right and left political movements, not as competing religions, but as religious nationalism and radical secularism respectively.¹⁸¹ He argues his predecessor, Bellah, did not go far enough to distinguish civil religion from these two ideologies and believes ACR can be reclaimed in the traditional sense by America's "vital center."¹⁸² Ultimately, he argues neither religious nationalism nor radical secularism can heal or prevail in American culture because they both fundamentally exclude the followers of the other missing the critical element of shared belonging.¹⁸³

In his most recently published book, Gorski approaches a connecting topic to this project—evangelical support for President Trump. Gorski aims to label the right Trump-base movement as religious nationalism vice a type of civil religion. He explains one of four key segments of post-Reagan Republicanism as white supremacy.¹⁸⁴ Gorski offers that white

¹⁸⁰ Benjamin P. Marcus, "How Trump is reshaping American civil religion and what we can do about it," *Religion News Service*, July 10, 2017.

¹⁸¹ Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, xviii.

¹⁸² Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, xviii.

¹⁸³ Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, 4.

¹⁸⁴ Philip Gorski, *American Babylon: Christianity and Democracy Before and After Trump*, Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020, 82.

evangelical support for Trump is best explained by the deep historical connection of White Christian Nationalism to white evangelicalism.

The connection of white evangelicals to racism and Trump comes through the correlation of white evangelicalism with white Christian nationalism.¹⁸⁵ However, he admits one anomaly to this connection seems to be that opinion and social polls suggest devout white evangelicals are less prejudicial and more open to interracial marriage and immigration than other demographics of Trump's base.¹⁸⁶ Gorski writes, "while few white evangelicals would now defend white supremacy, some of the theological positions it spawned live on."¹⁸⁷ So, the platforms of "opposition to the welfare state and support for free markets," stanchions of white evangelical theology, create an institutional connection to white Christian nationalism while remaining distant from personal racism.¹⁸⁸ With this in mind, Gorski suggests the issue of race will eventually cause white evangelicals to explore how their prejudices may have skewed how they understand Scripture. In addressing the future of American Christianity and politics, Gorski predicts much of what has been observed in the previous chapters of this project. If the current trajectory continues, evangelicalism will fracture along "racial and generational lines" and may cave completely. Simultaneously, nones will grow, particularly from the ranks of moderates and progressives as they realize there is "no place for them within organized religion."¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Gorski, *American Babylon: Christianity and Democracy Before and After Trump*, 108.

¹⁸⁶ Philip Gorski, *American Babylon: Christianity and Democracy Before and After Trump*, 96, 108.

¹⁸⁷ Gorski, *American Babylon: Christianity and Democracy Before and After Trump*, 97.

¹⁸⁸ Gorski, *American Babylon: Christianity and Democracy Before and After Trump*, 97.

¹⁸⁹ Gorski, *American Babylon: Christianity and Democracy Before and After Trump*, 125.

Gorski's prediction seems to offer support for this hypothesis and not his belief that religious nationalism and radical secularism are at play. If evangelicals splinter over race and generation this would be as a result of political or social differences, not theological or religious, assuming they maintain their evangelical theology. The rise of nones also supports this theory as the cause is an aversion to political religion not traditional spiritual religion. While scholarship has differed on exactly how civil religion has been and should be represented since Bellah's 1967 essay, the political power of ACR coupled with decreasing religious affiliation and rising partisanship warrants a revisit of Wuthnow's conservative and liberal civil religion theory. This idea is strengthened considering Trump's blatant and brash approach to wooing evangelicals while eschewing any personal commitment to their religious beliefs. The St. John's photo, in particular the contrast of holding up the Bible without paying any personal or religious creed to its teachings or the beliefs of its followers, suggests an obvious acknowledgment of the political capital at hand for those willing to wrap it in religious garb.

Methodology

This chapter utilizes both polling data and a case study addressing recent events to better examine the posed research questions. First, election and political contribution data from the *Center for Responsive Politics* is used to measure how political spending is changing. Data from charitable contributions are also included to contrast political and religious American donation habits. Second, various sources are used to examine the trend of estimated attendance and frequency of political protests in the U.S.

A case study is then used to better examine American civil religion in the age of the Trump presidency. Tweets and political and religious events are analyzed for connections to ACR and specifically the evangelical faith group. These two methods provide a multi-faceted approach to determining if Americans are more politically affiliated than religiously affiliated and how, as a result, civil religion is affected and possibly changing in a more partisan and less religious environment.

Data Presentation

The difficulty of determining if Americans have replaced spiritual religion with political religion or if two civil religions exist has been previously discussed. This is most notably due to ambiguity in defining civil religion and understanding how it has been implemented or exercised in politics. However, to determine how the relationship between religion and politics is changing, an attempt to address this interaction must be made. This question has profound implications for the future of American democracy and faith as politics continue to divide Americans.

The gospel of Matthew records Christ's words, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."¹⁹⁰ For Christians, this verse challenges them to search their life for what they value to determine what they believe. In other words, what is valued and where and how it is spent reveals the heart. Life, especially for modern Americans, consists of two key resources, time and money. How these two resources are spent reveals much about what Americans value and may show how beliefs in the US are shifting. Increased attention and commitment to

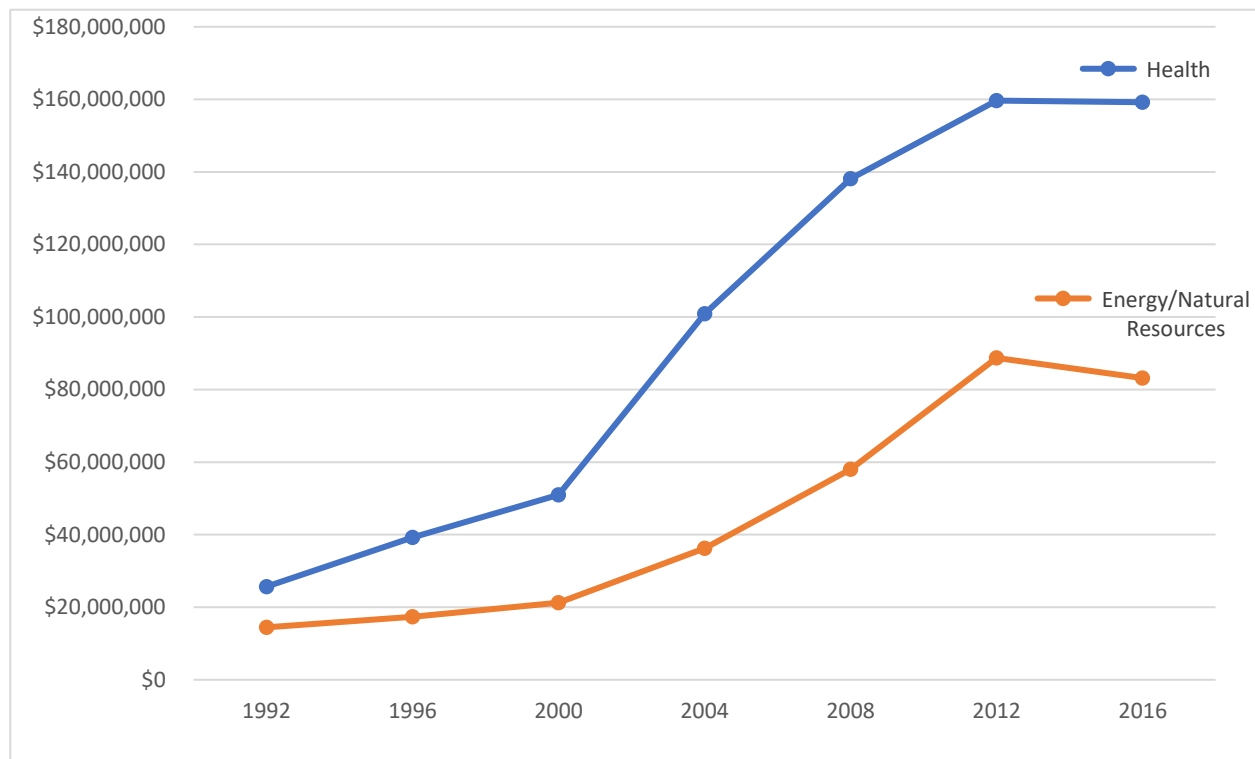
¹⁹⁰ Matthew 6:21 (NIV).

political matters signals a possible greater belief in civil religion than faith religion. For this reason, this study analyzes shifts in American spending habits of these two resources.

Trends in American Contribution Habits

Though political donations to campaigns and causes have grown substantially over time by corporations, PACs, and lobbyist groups, more telling, is the increase of American individual political contributions. The non-partisan think tank, *Center for Responsive Politics* (CPR), has tracked the cumulative political contributions of these groups and individuals to better understand how politics is affected by money. Figure 3.1 illustrates the total giving of individuals, contributing \$200 or more, to political parties or candidates during the noted major election year. In this figure CPR's study represents the long-term trend of contributions related to the industries or topics of Health and Energy or Natural resources, two topics hotly debated in current political circles.

Figure 3.1 – Individual Political Contributions by Industry (1992-2016)



Source: Center for Responsive Politics. Graph compiled by the author.

The data for Figure 3.1 includes years that held presidential elections to reflect the points throughout the 24-year period that garnered the greatest political contributions. Though individual donations typically recede during non-election years the overall trend from this data represents a significant increase in the amount of money Americans contribute to affect political change in the health and energy sectors. When reviewing the energy and natural resources sector, American spending for political purposes, rose over 300 percent from the 1990s to 2016, where totals eclipsed the \$80 million mark.¹⁹¹ On the topic of health, Americans have opened their wallets even more freely when considering total dollars. In 2012 and 2016, political contributions related to health rose over 200 percent and reached the \$159 million

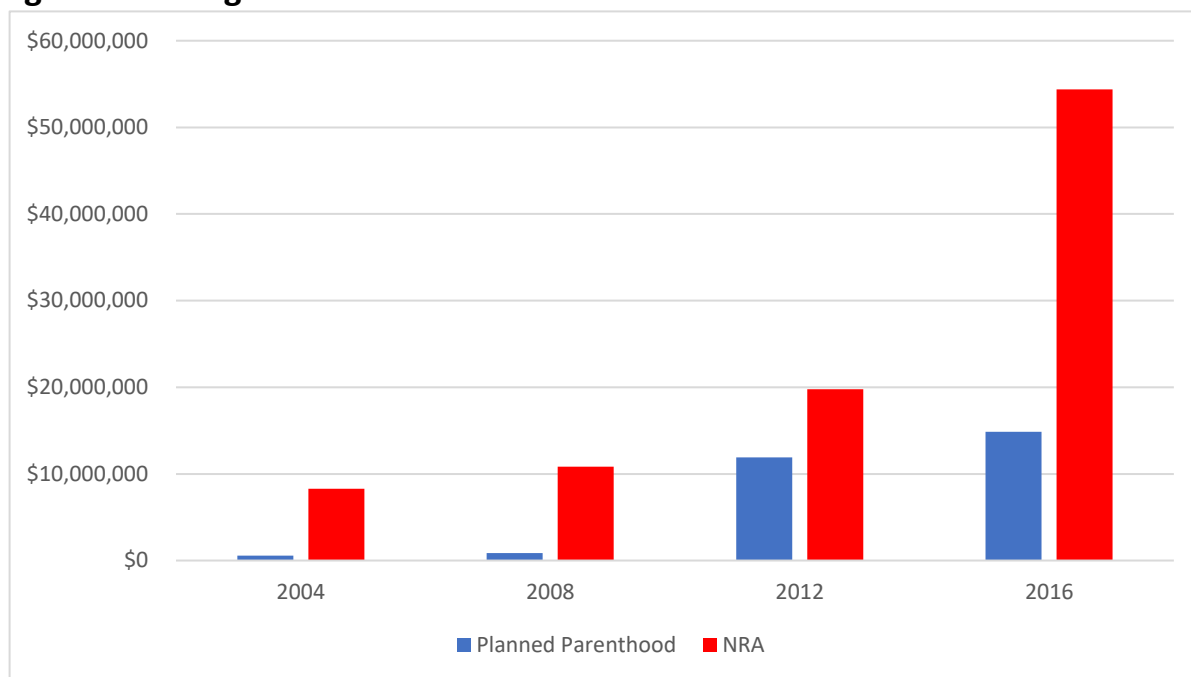
¹⁹¹ Center for Responsive Politics, "Energy/Natural Resources: Long-Term Contribution Trends," *Center for Responsive Politics*, June 22, 2020.

mark in both election years.¹⁹² Of note is the sharp increase in spending from 2000 to 2012 where numbers have remained stable and high through 2016. This data set captures contributions to these topics for both the Republican and Democratic parties and their candidates showing the overall rise in American spending for political causes on both sides of the aisle. Though it may not delineate the growth of the number of contributors it does point to the increasing importance Americans place on political matters and the growing size of political coffers.

Regarding partisan politics, two of the most prominent and powerful political groups on the conservative and liberal side reflect a similar increasing trend in political spending over time. Figure 3.2 shows the growth of political spending by the traditionally conservative gun advocacy organization, the National Rifle Association, and the traditionally liberal reproductive health organization, Planned Parenthood.

¹⁹² Center for Responsive Politics, "Health: Long-Term Contribution Trends," *Center for Responsive Politics*, June 22, 2020.

Figure 3.2 – Organization Total Contributions to Federal Elections



Source: Center for Responsive Politics. Graph compiled by the author.

Covering the four most recent presidential election years, this data represents overall growth in political spending for two organizations on either side of the ideological spectrum. From 2004 to 2016, Planned Parenthood increased its spending on federal elections from \$552,858 to \$14,874,250.¹⁹³ The NRA in comparison spent over \$54 million on elections in 2016, 6.5 times it's spending in the 2004 election year.¹⁹⁴ Both organizations demonstrated exponential growth in political contributions during each presidential election over the twelve-year period. Though groups like Planned Parenthood and the NRA raise funds from various sources and do not necessarily show greater investment by individual members, the overall point is that spending for political reasons and purposes has risen sharply over time. These graphs show a growing emphasis, from an individual and organizational standpoint, on political matters.

¹⁹³ Center for Responsive Politics, "Planned Parenthood," *Center for Responsive Politics*, June 26, 2020.

¹⁹⁴ Center for Responsive Politics, "National Rifle Assn," *Center for Responsive Politics*, June 26, 2020.

Total political spending across the board is growing, but individual political contributions independent of PACs and lobbyist groups demonstrate important changes in how Americans engage in politics. A 2017 Campaign Finance Task Force report noted, “individual contributions increased roughly 40 percent from 2000 to 2004 and more than doubled from 2008 to 2012.”¹⁹⁵ The report also found direct political contributions from individuals were growing at a faster rate than contributions from PACs which was driven by an increase in the number of Americans donating to politics.¹⁹⁶ This clip signals a growing number of individual citizens are becoming more financially invested in the political arena over time.

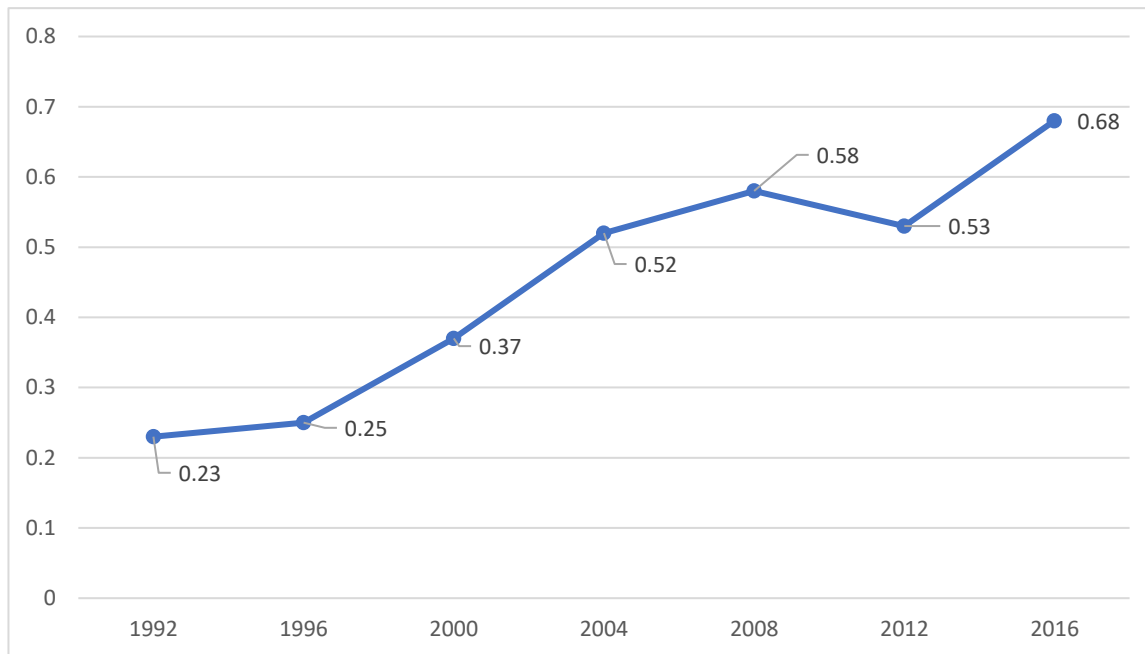
Viewing political contribution trends directly compared with religious contribution trends explicitly denotes how American giving patterns are changing. These patterns represent more clearly what Americans value and what is changing about what they hold important in their daily lives. Figure 3.3 represents the trend of the US population, 18 and over, that has contributed \$200 or more to a political party, PAC, or candidate per presidential election year. Though the number of Americans that contribute to politics is less than 1% of the total population, this statistic is on the rise. In 1992, less than a quarter of a percent of US adults sent itemizable donations to a political cause. By 2016, that number grew 2.5 times to 0.68 percent of the adult population.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Zachary Albert, “Trends in Campaign Financing, 1980-2016,” Report for the Campaign Finance Task Force, *Bipartisan Policy Center*, October 12, 2017, 5.

¹⁹⁶ Albert, “Trends in Campaign Financing, 1980-2016,” Report for the Campaign Finance Task Force, *Bipartisan Policy Center*, 16.

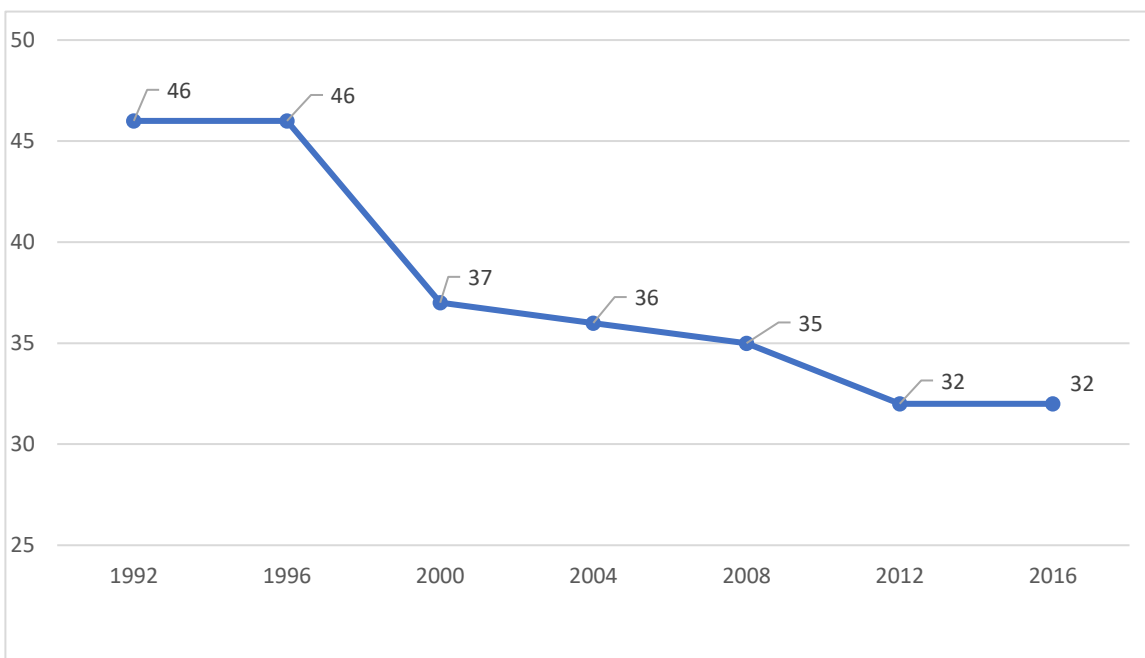
¹⁹⁷ Center for Responsive Politics, “Donor Demographics,” *Center for Responsive Politics*.

Figure 3.3 – Percentage of U.S. Adult Population Contributing to Politics (\$200+)



Source: Center for Responsive Politics. Graph compiled by the author.

Figure 3.4 – Percentage of all U.S. Charitable Contributions to Religious Institutions



Source: Giving USA. Graph compiled by the author.

Further, the percentage of Americans giving to politics grew every major election cycle since the early 1990s, save 2012.¹⁹⁸ This gradual uptick in political spending shows greater American individual investment in politics.

At the same time Americans are increasing contributions to politics, contributions to religion are shrinking. Figure 3.4 shows the trend of total American charity donations that are portioned to religious faith groups over time. The same election year cycles were analyzed as the years observed in Figure 3.3. Religious institutions received just under 50 percent of all donations in 1992 but in 2016 that number fell to its lowest point in the past twenty-four years to 32 percent.¹⁹⁹ The fall in religious giving is even greater when considering earlier years. In 1984 religious contributions totaled 57 percent of all charity and in 1990, 54 percent.²⁰⁰ American charitable contributions have remained steady and grown in totality, however, specifically where this money is assigned is changing. This is attributive to the fact that Americans are leaving faith groups over time, but they are also redistributing their donations and signaling reassignment to different affiliations. Given the increase in political contributions from organizations and individuals and the decrease in religious contributions, American citizens are shifting priorities and action from faith affiliations to political ones in terms of financial capital.

¹⁹⁸ Center for Responsive Politics, "Donor Demographics," *Center for Responsive Politics*.

¹⁹⁹ Ann E. Kaplan ed., *Giving USA: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 1992*, AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy, no. 38, (1993), and David P. King and Thad Austin, "Religious Giving Holds Steady," *Lilly Family School of Philanthropy IUPI*, June 13, 2017.

²⁰⁰ Nathan Weber, ed., *Giving USA: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 1990*, AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy, no. 36 (1991) and ECFA, "Americans Donated \$125 Billion to Religion in 2018 - 29% of All Charitable Giving," *Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability*.

Trends in Political Action Habits

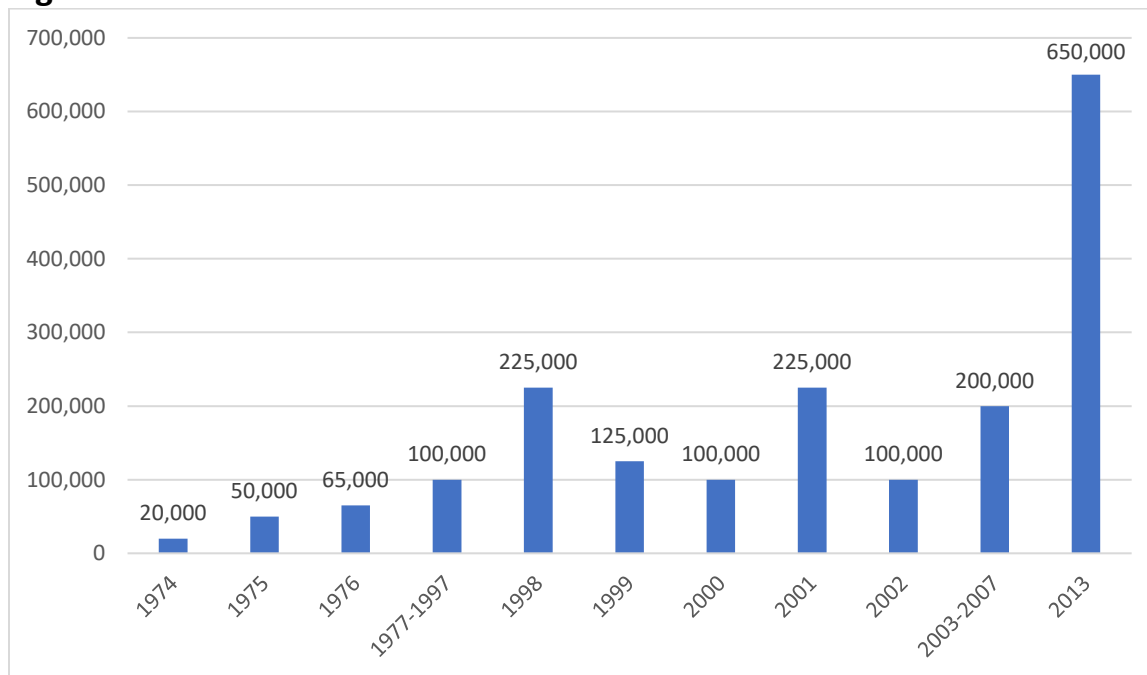
Financial contributions are only one form of currency, time in the form of action is the other basic factor which suggests loyalty, affiliation, and purpose. While Americans contribute their time to interests in various ways, one quantifiable measurement is action related to exercising First Amendment rights to organize and protest. The desire to engage politically is a call more Americans are answering.

A Gallup poll published in 2018 found 36 percent of Americans expressed and reported an urge to protest compared to just 10 percent in 1965.²⁰¹ The poll author assesses this increase is due to growing polarization but also notes the contrast of the political climate of 1965 to 2018 as the former included massive unrest due to the civil rights movement and growing American distaste for the Vietnam war. While polarization is likely the primary factor for this increase the decline of religious affiliation likely also plays a role in American attitudes toward civil and political matters.

Americans have not just grown in their feelings toward political protests, they have also acted on this urge in greater commitment and numbers. The March for Life pro-life movement, formed in 1974 on the heels of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, represents one single-issue example of rising American protests. Since its beginning, the rally held in Washington D.C. has attracted more participants, more media attention, and more influential voices to its cause.

²⁰¹ RJ Reinhart, "One in Three Americans Have Felt Urge to Protest," *Gallup*, August 24, 2018.

Figure 3.5 – Estimated Attendance at March for Life Rallies



Source: March for Life and *The New York Times*. Graph compiled by the author.

Figure 3.5 shows the estimated attendance of marchers at the event over time. Though some years have varied in size, 2013, the 40th anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, marked the largest historical crowd size at well over a half-million participants.²⁰² Later marches dwindled to estimates in the hundred thousand range but leverage for the movement has grown with Donald Trump, the first sitting President to directly speak to marchers, present at the January 2020 event.²⁰³ Over the history of the movement, the rally has grown considerably from its modest roots.

The recent years of the Trump presidency have seen accelerated political action among Americans and various causes. 2017, the first year of Trump's time in office, registered a drastic

²⁰² Laurie Goodstein and Anemona Hartocollis, "Abortion Foes Aim to Compete with Turnout for Women's March," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2017 and "History," *March For Life*, March 25, 2013.

²⁰³ Niquel, Terry Ellis, "Trump to join fired-up March for Life crowds as anti-abortion laws face court challenges," *USA Today*, January 24, 2020.

escalation in American protests. A sweeping 2020 study from the *Center for Strategic & International Studies* found U.S. protests grew 330 percent in January 2017 compared to the previous year.²⁰⁴ The study also noted a general increase and sustainment of various highly attended political protests aimed at issues including immigration, pro-choice, pro-life, teacher salaries, pride, climate change, science, truth, and Trump's travel ban.²⁰⁵ One event mentioned in the study, the Women's March event, quickly followed Trump's 2017 inauguration and has drawn sizable followings across the country in subsequent years. The march, which promotes various human and women's rights issues, attracted an estimated 470,000 marchers in 2017.²⁰⁶

It would be negligent to not strengthen this point with the continued civil and political unrest across the U.S. at the time of this writing. The killing of George Floyd while in Minneapolis police custody on May 25, 2020, has resulted in an explosion of nationwide and global protests aimed at addressing American police brutality and racial injustice. The scope and number of political protests—as well as subsequent and ongoing protests against federal and state statues honoring Confederate war officers—has reached a fever pitch unseen by the current American generation. In the two weeks following Floyd's death, hundreds of protests erupted in various cities in every single American state.²⁰⁷ The ongoing nature and scale of the protests have not allowed a detailed study of the exact participation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and related organizational protests but it is definitively staggering in scope. A recent *New*

²⁰⁴ Samuel J. Brannen, Christian S. Haig, and Katherine Schmidt, "The Age of Mass Protests: Understanding an Escalating Global Trend," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, March 2020, 10.

²⁰⁵ Brannen, Christian S. Haig, and Katherine Schmidt, "The Age of Mass Protests: Understanding an Escalating Global Trend," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 10.

²⁰⁶ Tim Wallace and Alicia Parlapiano, "Crowd Scientists Say Women's March in Washington Had 3 Times as Many People as Trump's Inauguration," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2017.

²⁰⁷ Audra D.S. Burch, Weiyi Cai, Gabriel Gianordoli, Morrigan McCarthy, and Jugal K. Patel, "How Black Lives Matter Reached Every Corner of America," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2020.

York Times article estimated a half-million protesters turned out to more than 550 events across the U.S. on June 6, 2020. The authors have totaled up at least 4,700 protests since May 26 at an average of 140 a day.²⁰⁸ Further, four separate polls have shown between 15 million and 26 million Americans self-reported protesting in a demonstration making the current BLM protests the largest in national history.²⁰⁹

An eventual reflective and comprehensive study of this movement will do much to understand the growth of American political participation related to the studies and polls included in this work. Regardless of issue or catalyst, political protests have dramatically increased in recent years lending credibility to the hypothesis that Americans are replacing religious participation with politics. This is evident in the combined trending factors of increased political spending with decreased religious spending and increased political protests with declining religious affiliation.

Donald Trump and American Civil Religion

The rapid rise in political giving and action, particularly protests, has accelerated during the Trump presidency. As religion declines and politics become more widespread in American dialogue it is crucial to look at how Trump may be redefining civil religion. To Benjamin Marcus' argument, Trump has focused his efforts on identifying himself with certain traditional pillars of civil religion. Unlike Bellah's original definition of civil religion that described it as a force used by Lincoln and Kennedy to unite all Americans by describing their shared identity using deeply

²⁰⁸ Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020.

²⁰⁹ Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *The New York Times*.

religious language, Trump has revived a form of Wuthnow's definition. Trump's use of civil religion is one that aligns with his specific political platform and worldview and serves to exclude any opposers as heretics of America. By defining opposition as non-American, Trump's use of ACR emboldens his base and draws a stark line between believers and non-believers. In this way, the right or conservative civil religion is the one true American civil religion. Trump has seized the generality and inclusivity of ACR to serve his particular political brand and in doing so leverages the power of the entirety of ACR for conservative civil religion.

Current civil religion has undergone a reemergence and transition from its absence in the 1990s. This transition has been primarily facilitated by the rise of partisanship and increased political engagement after the turn of the century. By drawing two distinct camps and aligning his with ACR, the Trump administration represents three possibilities for the new stage of civil religion. First, as previously mentioned, Bellah's ACR has been reconfigured and aligned with conservative civil religion making it a singular disunifying force with no opposing liberal civil religion. Second, sharpening polarization and growing political activity suggests Wuthnow's thesis of two competing right and left civil religions. Or third, in the traditional definition, ACR is simply dead or dormant in the current era. This case study will follow Trump's use of three mainstays of civil religion to better understand how it is currently represented. These pillars include the national anthem, the American flag, and national statues and monuments.

National Anthem Protests

Francis Scott Key's lyrics put to music has long stood as a cultural norm to be played and observed before national moments to include sporting events. As a national anthem, the song and reverence paid to its playing, has long represented a key element of patriotic sentiment

and national unity. Colin Kaepernick, a backup quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, first launched a protest, in what would become a nationwide affair and debate, by sitting during the national anthem before a preseason NFL game in late 2016. When asked about his decision after the game, Kaepernick explained his protest aimed to bring attention to police brutality and racial injustice, “I’m not going to stand up or show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.”²¹⁰ By the 2017 season, Kaepernick had amended his protest in the form of kneeling for the anthem. His ongoing movement sparked a broader voice of players in the NFL and gained a considerable following which catalyzed a media frenzy and national conversation.

The protests caught an explosive momentum when President Trump, in the same year, tweeted NFL owners should get any “son of a bitch” that protested off the field.²¹¹ Trump continued to tweet about the topic and encouraged owners to fire any player that would disrespect the flag or anthem. During his campaign, Trump heralded patriotic sentiments as a cornerstone and continued to define himself, by frequency of address, as a protectorate of the anthem and flag. In the fall of 2017, Trump tweeted about the NFL 18 times in a month and by late October had mentioned the anthem protests in 12% of his total tweets.²¹² Trump’s involvement in the anthem protests escalated tension between NFL owners, the league commissioner, and players. In early June 2020, after NFL commissioner Roger Goodell stated the league had failed in properly addressing player protests, Trump reignited the issue with a

²¹⁰ Cindy Boren, “A timeline of Colin Kaepernick’s protests against police brutality,” *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2020.

²¹¹ Boren, “A timeline of Colin Kaepernick’s protests against police brutality,” *The Washington Post*.

²¹² Sam Belden, “Trump tweeted about the NFL and national anthem 37 times in a month,” *Business Insider*, October 23, 2017.

tweet expressing that Goodell's statement could indicate the NFL was okay with players disrespecting the flag and anthem.²¹³ Kaepernick's actions in 2017 proved prescient in the current wake of the George Floyd killing which has continued the divide and national dialogue concerning police violence. Trump's insistence on continuing to bring the issue to surface and frame NFL anthem protests as disrespectful to the flag, military, and country, reveals his continued strategy to align himself with these symbols of civil religion. His tweets reinforce his commitment to protect these elements to his base of ACR believers and combat any counter-belief.

Flag Burning and Monuments

In hand with his campaign to protect proper observance of the national anthem, Trump has repeatedly declared his disdain for the burning of the American flag. With reverence toward the flag, he has positioned himself as the protector of another banner of ACR. In June of 2019, Trump tweeted that he was in full support of a constitutional amendment to ban flag burning calling the issue a "no brainer." Moreover, following a speech a few days later he walked with outstretched arms toward an onstage pedestaled American flag and hugged it as cameras flashed.²¹⁴ During his controversial June 20, 2020 campaign rally in Tulsa, OK, Trump once again highlighted flag burning by reiterating his belief that anyone that burns an American flag in protest should be put in jail for a year.²¹⁵ Trump called on GOP legislators to introduce a

²¹³ ESPN, "President Donald Trump reopens anthem debate with tweet aimed at Roger Goodell," *ESPN*, June 8, 2020.

²¹⁴ Colby Itkowitz, "'No Brainer': Trump tweets support for amendment banning flag burning," *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2019.

²¹⁵ Currently, the burning of the American flag has been ruled by the Supreme Court as a constitutionally protected action under the First Amendment.

law that would introduce a minimum one-year sentence.²¹⁶ In the same speech, Trump attacked the NFL anthem protests and claimed, “Never kneel—we will stand proud and stand tall.”²¹⁷ After starkly outlining his position on these symbols of ACR, Trump tied attacks on these elements directly to civil religion by claiming liberal culture aimed to “prosecute Americans for going to church but not burning a church.”²¹⁸ This point is demonstrative of Trump’s conflation of the attack of key symbols of American identity with attacks on the American church and Christianity, ensuring the connection between the anthem and the flag with Americans who go to church. An overarching theme of Trump’s 2020 campaign messaging is identifying himself as the defender of American symbols.

This is perhaps most evident by Trump’s recent speech given on July 4th, an important civil religious holiday, in the backdrop of a prominent civil religious monument, Mount Rushmore. Trump repeatedly discussed the destruction of monuments to America’s founding and history by “angry mobs.” He later declared America’s children should be “taught to love our country, honor our history, and respect our great American flag.”²¹⁹ Trump further defined himself as a protector of civil symbols by referencing his signing of an executive order to prosecute those who “damage or deface federal statues or monuments” with a minimum ten-year sentence.²²⁰ After extolling various historical American figures, Trump announced his

²¹⁶ Domenico Montanaro, “Trump Returns to Campaign Trail With A Familiar Message In A Changing World,” *NPR*, June 20, 2020.

²¹⁷ Montanaro, “Trump Returns to Campaign Trail With A Familiar Message In A Changing World,” *NPR*.

²¹⁸ Montanaro, “Trump Returns to Campaign Trail With A Familiar Message In A Changing World,” *NPR*.

²¹⁹ Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at South Dakota’s 2020 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration | Keystone, South Dakota,” *WhiteHouse.gov*, July 4, 2020.

²²⁰ Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at South Dakota’s 2020 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration | Keystone, South Dakota,” *WhiteHouse.gov*.

intent to sign an executive order creating a National Garden of American Heroes, an outdoor space filled with statues of prominent Americans.²²¹

The Evangelical Base

No other President in modern memory has so symbolically framed a speech with the pillars of ACR and spoke with such primary focus on ACR themes. However, an integral factor of Trump's use of ACR is the linkage to his religious base. His success in appealing to the strength of his 2016 white evangelical base rests on marrying conservative civil religion to himself and Christianity. In the same way he promotes the defense of elements of civil religion, he promotes the defense of religious ideals and values to better define them as one and the same. Evident in his Independence Day remarks, Trump, in condemning protestors intent on destroying America's history referenced the lyrics of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, a song that has long defined ACR and blended religious overtones with American ideals.²²²

Trump's doubling down on the use of ACR to promote the cause of American religion is a calculated attempt to maintain his strong white evangelical base from 2016. The St. John's Episcopal Bible photo demonstrated the power of fusing a political worldview to religious imagery and a clear example of Trump's unabashed use of this tool. The religious response to this event revealed division, inside of the Christian faith, between adherents of traditional spiritual faith and adherents that define themselves more strongly in terms of conservative civil

²²¹ Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at South Dakota's 2020 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration | Keystone, South Dakota," *WhiteHouse.gov*.

²²² Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at South Dakota's 2020 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration | Keystone, South Dakota," *WhiteHouse.gov*.

religion. Trump's act in Lafayette Square drew sharp condemnation from the Washington D.C. Episcopal Bishop and many other faith leaders in mainstream Protestant denominations, but some prominent evangelical voices expressed their support. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham and an ardent backer of President Trump, after being asked about the event tweeted that he wasn't offended and was "encouraged by it."²²³ Robert Jeffress, the pastor of the 14,000 member First Baptist Church in Dallas, stated Trump's actions at St. John's Episcopal were "completely appropriate" and "...by holding up the Bible, he was showing us that it teaches that, yes, God hates racism, it's despicable—but god also hates lawlessness."²²⁴ Jeffress has been a staunch advocate and an important link to Trump's ACR and the evangelical community.

On June 28, 2020, Pastor Jeffress hosted a "Celebrate Freedom Sunday" at First Baptist before the July 4th holiday. The church service featured guest speaker Vice President Mike Pence. Thousands of parishioners waved tiny American flags with Ben Carson, Texas Senator John Cornyn, and Texas Governor Greg Abbott in attendance.²²⁵ The service represented an overt nod to ACR and evangelicalism as it opened with renditions of the national anthem and the anthems of the military service branches. Pence focused on discussing his personal faith as well as elements of Trump's 2020 campaign platform touting his work of strengthening the military, protecting Second Amendment rights, and supporting the pro-life movement.²²⁶ A

²²³ Mia Jankowicz, "Trump's evangelical base is ecstatic over his bible photo op, which many other Christian leaders have condemned," *Insider*, June 4, 2020.

²²⁴ McKay Coppins, "The Christians Who Loved Trump's Stunt," *The Atlantic*.

²²⁵ James Hartley, "Prayer is needed now more than ever, Vice President Pence tells First Baptist Dallas," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 28, 2020.

²²⁶ Hartley, "Prayer is needed now more than ever, Vice President Pence tells First Baptist Dallas," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.

reporter noted that Pence received a standing ovation of applause after discussing the importance of supporting law enforcement.²²⁷

The Celebrate Freedom Sunday program serves as one data point showing Trump has only escalated his efforts to align his 2020 reelection campaign with ACR themes and Christian evangelicalism. However, there is some evidence that cracks are forming in evangelical support for the President. These cracks have only begun to show in the face of the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump's hardline approach against racial injustice protests. Due to the timing and themes, these cracks suggest some moderate evangelicals are becoming averse to conservative civil religion aligned with their faith affiliation. In early June 2020, 30 mostly white evangelicals from fields such as politics, the ministry, and psychology published a compilation of essays in a book titled *The Spiritual Danger of Donald Trump* which seeks to illustrate the spiritual imperative to unhitch evangelicalism from the President.²²⁸ Pew Research published a poll finding in May 2020 that showed white evangelical approval of Trump's response to the coronavirus pandemic fell 6 percentage points from March 2020, though as a bloc, support for Trump remains high.²²⁹

Further, Trump's approach toward protests following the death of George Floyd serves as another area where evangelical views may be shifting from the President's. Amid widespread protests, Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) President J.D. Greear, called for the retirement of a gavel, used since 1872 to open meetings and named for the founder of the Southern Baptist

²²⁷ Hartley, "Prayer is needed now more than ever, Vice President Pence tells First Baptist Dallas," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.

²²⁸ Ronald J. Sider, ed., *The Spiritual Danger of Donald Trump: 30 Evangelical Christians on Justice, Trust, and Moral Integrity*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020).

²²⁹ Gregory A. Smith, "White evangelicals among groups with slipping confidence in Trump's handling of COVID-19," *Pew Research Center*, May 14, 2020.

Theological Seminary and Confederate sympathizer and slaveholder, John A. Broadus.²³⁰

Greear, president of the major evangelical organization with its complicated past of slavery, stated the news a day after he urged congregants to say “black lives matter.”²³¹ The SBC’s move to definitively vocalize their position on racial injustice contrasts with Trump’s remarks. The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic response combined with massive civil unrest surrounding racial injustice may be the line some evangelicals have drawn to distance themselves from Trump’s ACR. Ultimately, these events may show support for the thesis that Trump has configured ACR to support his political purposes. Chapter two of this work showed the exodus of moderate mainline protestants and Catholics to the Democratic Party and the nones category. The possible fracturing of the evangelical base in the 2020 election may represent a similar pattern of aversion to the blending of faith affiliation and a particular political party. Moderate evangelicals may break from their conservative civil religion counterparts for a more detached spiritual faith affiliation or begin to assign as nones.

Analysis and Discussion

Though a detailed explanation and assessment of ACR in the current era remains a challenging problem, there are points regarding changes in American religious and political activity that are evidentially supported in this study. Data compiled for Figures 3.1 and 3.2 show a stark rise in political spending by both individuals and groups over the past two decades. Additionally, Figure 3.3 and Figure 3.4 support this first point and also show the decline of

²³⁰ Adelle Banks, “J.D. Greear Urges SBC to Retire Historic Gavel from Slaveholding Preacher,” *Christianity Today*, June 10, 2020.

²³¹ Banks, “J.D. Greear Urges SBC to Retire Historic Gavel from Slaveholding Preacher,” *Christianity Today*.

religious contributions, while Americans at the same time, are giving more and in greater numbers to political causes. While Figure 3.5 shows the growth of political participation from a single-issue perspective, research from CSIS and news sources illustrates the widespread nature of American protests in many forms and on various issues. However, the rise of U.S. domestic protests observed in the past few years pales in comparison to the magnitude of current civil unrest and the Black Lives Matter movement. The data from this chapter, when viewed with the broader research in this project, support the growth of political engagement, affiliation, and belief over religious association. While partisanship has likely served as the main contributor to the growth of political action, religious decline, as shown in previous chapters, is inextricably linked to these outcomes.

The connection to religious decline and the rise of political engagement will be better understood by a focus on and greater study of the current health of ACR. The unique and religiously toned nature of civil religion makes it a suitable vehicle for Americans to transition from traditional religious faith to political faith and identity. Based on President Trump's use of ACR, this faith has revealed its power as an effective habitat for the growth of conservative politics.

On the left, this study has not approached or explored the validity of liberal civil religion. On one hand, the BLM protests and growth of anti-Trump political movements like the Women's March and the tearing down of Confederate statues point to the possibility of a liberal civil religion that is mostly counter to the right and Trump's ACR. However, the idea of liberal civil religion lacks the religious overtones and historical connections that more easily define conservative civil religion with evangelicalism and the Republican party. This fact does

not definitively mean a liberal civil religion does not exist but based on the more traditional definition, it is more likely the tenure of the Trump presidency supports the first explanation of the current civil religion environment. That is, ACR has become one with his platform and an excluding power. Additional study should be conducted to assess the possibility that the rise of leftist political ideology and engagement behaves and identifies in the same way as conservative civil religion. Further, this requires broadening the definition of civil religion to determine how political beliefs may reflect similar effects as the religious rhetoric and symbolism that more effortlessly mesh with conservative civil religion.

Conclusion

Considering the first segment of the arguments cited in this chapter, Americans are trending toward greater faith and belief in politics by way of increasing political engagement. While political spending by groups and organizations has increased, individual Americans are also spending more on politics over time. In addition to spending, more Americans are mobilizing, protesting, and interacting in politics. This trend will likely continue to gain strength, particularly when time affords a comprehensive look at current civil unrest amidst a national and global pandemic. Further, it is clear while Americans are becoming more political and partisan, they are also shedding these same engagements in traditional religious groups. The relationship between these two trends is identifiable as the decline of religion seems to feed the growth of American focus on politics.

This relationship supports the idea that Americans are trading their religious identities and associations with ones aligned with a particular political worldview. The translation of faith

to politics meaning the rise of civil religion is a more difficult connection to evidentially support. Civil religion has proved “episodic” as it has risen and faded from academic discourse and political discussion. However, the Trump presidency marks an important shift in the way ACR operates in American politics. The voting pattern of white evangelicals in the 2020 presidential election will be instrumental in understanding Trump’s impact on ACR and how it interacts with evangelical Christians. A break in support for Trump and how or if evangelicals begin to drop their faith tag in the future, combined with the continued rise of the nones, will strengthen points proposed in this project.

As for the current state of civil religion, Trump’s attempted association with traditional ACR symbols and narratives is clear. His divisive and polarizing rhetoric and impact on American politics mark an evolution in ACR as a divisive political weapon rather than a unifying power. It must be noted literature and study of civil religion are monopolized by voices from the field of sociology. More studies must be done in the field of politics to better understand the presence of ACR in politics and its impact on the electorate. Further studies should resurrect a form of Ronald Wimberly’s questionnaire to better assess the current state of civil religion. This type of study, in conjunction with the findings of greater political engagement, could shed light on the validity of Wuthnow’s competing civil religion thesis and perhaps show if nones on the liberal side of the political spectrum hold a type of ACR belief. Questions could also be developed to examine the possibility of a separation between American evangelicals that identify with conservative civil religion and those who identify with the evangelical spiritual tradition.

Recent events, at the time of this writing, promote in some sense more questions but also more uncultivated data and case studies from which to explore how politics and faith are

interacting. In the tense political and cultural climate, the impact of these two themes grows in importance as American unity seems a characteristic of a bygone era. All Americans would do well to consider these questions of identity and how each may affect an individual's purpose and local and national cohesion.

CONCLUSION

As noted in the introduction, current events, have magnified certain elements of the relationship between American faith and politics. At the very least, the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests have exposed deeply held belief structures inside the American populace and have highlighted discrepancies between how Americans act on these beliefs. The research and study involved with this thesis have produced many new questions and avenues for continued scholarship on this subject as dynamics change. The evolving relationship between religion and politics includes a deep well of nuances and unexplored areas that require addressing to better understand the scope and nature of this topic. However, this study has concluded some major findings to promote additional consideration.

- 1. America's religious profile is indeed changing, Nones are growing and Christian groups are in decline.**

Chapter one concluded American faith affiliation is shrinking and the number of religious nones continues to grow rapidly. This finding is further reinforced by evidence that shows this trend will proceed into the foreseeable future. Millennials and Post-Millennials are

leaving the faith in higher numbers than previous generations and express social, cultural, and political views that demonstrate an aversion to the historical linkage of Christianity, in particular, with conservative politics. The ranks of the religiously unaffiliated will continue to be supplied by these younger generations and Protestant Christian numbers will suffer as a result.

2. Evangelical Christianity has proved resilient and survivable compared to other Christian traditions.

Though a growing portion of nones has left the Mainline Protestant and Catholic faith traditions for the religious non-affiliated label, evangelicals have sustained their numbers over time. Evangelicals have also retained the largest number of Millennial followers of any faith-based group. This may be due to the survivability and force of their theological beliefs but could also be attributed to their slide right politically and socially that may attract and retain more conservative Americans that see this worldview threatened by faith decline. However, given the rapid growth of nones and overall Christian decline, evangelicals are not immune to the patterns currently affecting Mainline Protestants and would do well to acknowledge this fact.

3. Partisanship continues to grow while religion declines.

While the exact interaction between these two facts is not fully understood at this time, the correlation is clear. The increase of partisanship in the U.S. is forcing changes in how Americans assign to and identify with a religion. As a result, faith groups will either lose relevance and numbers or adopt and strengthen a political ideology on the extreme end of the spectrum. Drawing on the conclusions of the second chapter, moderate and more socially

liberal Christians in the Mainline Protestant faith traditions are the largest group leaving their traditional faith tag to become nones. While Christianity declines, currently among Mainline Protestants, the reassignment of Christians as nones will likely creep into moderate evangelical camps. This movement could push remaining evangelicals under threat further right politically. As this occurs simultaneously with political polarization traditional evangelicalism becomes more aligned with and identified by Republican political identity producing an overall effect of greater dissent between the political left and right fueling polarization. This is not to say that all traditional or spiritual religion is dead or will become nonexistent but that this interaction pushes traditional religion into the political sphere ultimately costing it not only adherents but also wounding the historical faith-politics separation.

4. Evangelicals are growing in influence and numbers inside the Republican Party while Nones are doing so in the Democratic Party.

Chapter two assessed and tracked the many movements of Christians and nones politically. As nones assign as Democrats with increasing frequency and strength, evangelicals as a result are gaining a greater foothold in the Republican party. This finding likely means more evidence that Americans, by faith assignment as well, are growing apart politically paving the way for greater political and theological division.

5. Americans are increasingly engaging in politics rather than religion.

Though it may seem obvious given the fall in religious affiliation, politics are gaining importance in the lives of American citizens. Both organizations and individuals are giving more

money to political matters while religious contributions decline. Additionally, Americans are protesting in greater numbers, at greater frequency, and for more political issues. This finding supports a running hypothesis in this thesis that Americans are trading religion for politics.

6. President Trump's use of American civil religion represents a new understanding of the theory.

The power of civil religious symbology has proved itself a valuable resource to the Trump administration's reelection campaign strategy. Trump has used civil religion in a distinctly different way than previous presidents as a rallying tool for a base of political supporters rather than a unifying force for American cohesion. Civil religion appears to be an effective device for Trump to court and keep white evangelicals, those most attracted to political conservatism and the advancement of their religious beliefs in government. Yet, how white and other evangelicals vote in the 2020 presidential election could reveal a fusing of these matters that crosses a sacred line for some. The evangelical vote will be particularly important to determine if a schism exists between political and more traditionally spiritual evangelicals. The growth of partisanship and the migration of political discourse to the ends of the spectrum have facilitated the use of ACR in this way. The current state of politics and religion has altered civil religion from its original definition because of its foundational feature that powerfully combines these two themes.

It is worth noting here Rousseau's theoretical problem with spiritual religion and its impact on the effectiveness of civil religion. Rousseau believed Christianity, in particular, posed a threat to civil religion for the state because its adherents—fixated on the spiritual realm of

the eternal—could pollute the duty and responsibility of the earthly purpose of citizens.

Christopher Wraight explains Rousseau believed, “there is nothing worse for the social spirit than having the attention of the populace detached from the world and diverted to considerations of the hereafter.”²³² This sentiment was echoed by Fichte’s observation, referenced at the beginning of the second chapter, that the early Christians were transported “wholly beyond the earth” by their belief in the afterlife.

Rousseau’s solution to the problem of spiritual religion was national generally agreed upon “creeds” that would be distant enough from a specific theology to protect against eternal distraction but close enough to provide civic and societal moral guidance toward a common purpose.²³³ In Bellah’s traditional explanation of ACR, this has been the *modus operandi*. However, Trump’s coupling of ACR themes and symbols to his Republican base and evangelicalism forces Christians, even more than they already have in the U.S., to enter the political sphere to protect their interests. In effect, a threat to one of the combined entities, ACR symbols, Christianity, or Republican platforms represents a threat to all. Conversely, this creates further exclusion and dissonance as Americans that are not proponents of these must vehemently reject their influence and promotion.

Scholastically, the specific effect of declining American religion and the rise of the nones on democracy has been underserved. Though there is much scholarship identifying the nones and discussing trending religious disaffiliation, there is less that confronts how these changes interact with polarization. This thesis acts as only an initial introduction to this topic that is

²³² Christopher D. Wraight, *Rousseau’s The Social Contract*, (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 115.

²³³ Wraight, *Rousseau’s The Social Contract*, 116.

perhaps changing too rapidly to fully understand at the moment. Civil religion, a term that has faded from common academic discussion in previous decades, is a theory that now deserves reintroduction to scholarship particularly in the field of political science. Though this thesis has found evidential points to support the overarching hypothesis that politics are supplanting religion, there are many additional areas to study before conclusively sealing this claim.

Studies should be conducted on media intake and daily habit patterns of both religious and non-religious Americans. Chapter two cited a concern of prominent Pastor Tim Keller that American Christians were more exposed to and affected by political intake than Scripture reading or prayer. In the 24/7 news cycle, filled with political commentators as entertainment, and the explosive power of social media, even devout religiously affiliated Americans are likely overtaken and influenced by political matters rather than religious. A better understanding of what Americans spend their daily time doing, viewing, and reading will show how politics or religion may affect their identity and purpose.

This thesis primarily examined evangelicals and to a lesser extent nones. To develop a more comprehensive picture of this topic, research should, with greater depth, be conducted on Catholicism, Mormonism, Judaism, and Islam in the U.S. Do similar patterns follow in these faith traditions? If not, why and are these faith groups changing due to polarization? Are they as homogenous in a political voice as evangelicals or is politics less influential?

Another limitation of this study was the focus on general evangelicalism or white evangelicals. Black evangelicals as a subgroup portray some political similarities to white evangelicals but also diverging priorities on certain issues. Understanding the impact of race on political and religious assignment will shed greater light on the questions put forward in this

thesis. Given the heightened focus on racial inequality in America, race plays an important, and perhaps more prominent role in political affiliation than theology.

Lastly, if Americans are replacing faith with a more powerful belief in and commitment to politics then the study of liberal none's political cohesion compared to that of conservative evangelical's is crucial. Do nones vote and act, on certain social issues, with the same homogeneity as evangelicals? Are political contributions on the right and the left, fervor and enthusiasm, and unity of voice on certain issues mirrored on either end? If so, this may show similar beliefs and actions supporting the hypothesis. As discussed in the third chapter, regarding Wuthnow's thesis of two competing liberal and conservative civil religions, ACR seamlessly integrates conservative politics with religious themes and language already common to religious affiliates on the right. A liberal civil religion, largely secular and proposedly filled with nones, would be unfamiliar with and uninfluenced by such religious rhetoric. However, this in itself does not mean liberal civil religion is a myth or that a civil religion on the left cannot operate in the same way as one on the right. If a growing power of political beliefs on the left and right increasingly drives action, mission, and life purpose, then there may be little that practically differentiates a civil religion on the left and right other than religious terminology.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and associated federal, state, and local restrictions to stop the spread of the virus and disputes over these decisions emphasizes the variance between how religious and political beliefs are observed in the U.S. American courts have a long history of exempting religious groups from certain laws as protected under the First Amendment. With the decline of religious affiliation and rise in political engagement, these exemptions present an applicable governmental challenge with current events. While this topic has accumulated

enough recent attention and court challenges to spark a full study alone, it bears mentioning the comparison and contrast between religious gatherers and Black Lives Matter protestors both eager to confront stay-at-home orders to suit their interests.

In March 2020, a Florida pastor was arrested after defiantly holding public services in opposition to an order against large gatherings. Two days later, after mostly conservative backlash, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis overruled labeling religious services as essential activities.²³⁴ Texas Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican in a red state, in an executive order directing Texans to “minimize social gatherings,” ensured religious services were exempted from the order.²³⁵ Two months later, the growing protests following George Floyd’s death created a similar issue on the left. In June, Pennsylvania’s Democratic Governor Tom Wolf received criticism after defying his own stay-at-home recommendations to march with Black Lives Matter protestors in the state’s capital, Harrisburg. After being asked if he planned to quarantine following his exposure to so many people, Wolf replied he “thought that the risk was worth taking for that specific cause.”²³⁶ Similar incidents occurred across the country while COVID-19 orders have prompted numerous First Amendment challenges and highlighted legal differences between religious gatherers and political protestors.

Questions of applicability and exemption regarding COVID-19 state executive orders for religious or political gatherings present a germane segue way to how recent events are revealing the impact of changes in American religion and politics. These events practically

²³⁴ Tom Gjelten, “States Consider Whether Religious Services Qualify As ‘Essential’,” *NPR*, April 1, 2020.

²³⁵ Gjelten, “States Consider Whether Religious Services Qualify As ‘Essential’,” *NPR*.

²³⁶ Jim Melwert, “Wolf, Arkoosh—2 outspoken proponents for PA. stay-at-home orders—criticized for marching with protestors,” *kywnnewsradio*, June 5, 2020.

represent the balance between the two at risk. The influence of religion on American democracy has been a cornerstone since the nation's founding. While politics will always exist as an elemental part of government, faith is perhaps more fragile in a democracy. If religion fully shrinks from the American experience then something must fill its place, or at least, its impact on politics. Given the findings of this study, the growing hole left by declining traditional religion will likely be filled by partisan ideology and identity which already threatens American solidarity. For some Americans, religious decline may be a welcomed trend but all, both religious and secular, should understand this historical intersection and balance has largely defined and upheld American governance. Perhaps changes in the religious and political landscape should not immediately elicit alarm or excitement but they should produce, at the very least, closer examination and study as these institutions are the integral underpinnings of American democracy.

Bibliography

- Abramowitz, Alan I. "The New American Electorate: Partisan, Sorted, and Polarized." In *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, edited by James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 16-44.
- Albert, Zachary. "Trends in Campaign Financing, 1980-2016." Report for the Campaign Finance Task Force. *Bipartisan Policy Center*. October 12, 2017. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/age-mass-protests-understanding-escalating-global-trend>.
- Anderson, Leith. "Evangelical ≠ Political." *National Association of Evangelicals*. Last modified Winter 2017/18. <https://www.nae.net/evangelical-political/>.
- Banks, Adelle. "J.D. Greear Urges SBC to Retire Historic Gavel from Slaveholding Preacher." *Christianity Today*. June 10, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/june/jd-greear-southern-baptist-convention-broadus-gavel-sbc.html>.
- Barna. "Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z." *Barna*. Last modified January 24, 2018. <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.
- Barna. "Gen Z: Your Questions Answered." *Barna*. February 6, 2018. <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/>.
- Barna. "How Teenagers' Faith Practices are Changing." *Barna*. July 12, 2010. <https://www.barna.com/research/how-teenagers-faith-practices-are-changing/>.
- Beinart, Peter. "Breaking Faith: The culture war over religious morality has faded; in its place is something much worse." *The Atlantic*. April 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/breaking-faith/517785/>.
- Belden, Sam. "Trump tweeted about the NFL and national anthem 37 times in a month." *Business Insider*. October 23, 2017. <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-twitter-campaign-against-anthem-protests-2017-10>.
- Bellah, Robert N. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* 96, no. 1, (Winter 1967): 1-21.
- Black, Amy E. "Evangelicals, Politics, and Public Policy." In *The Future of Evangelicalism in America*. Ed. Candy Gunther Brown and Mark Silk. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

- Boren, Cindy. "A timeline of Colin Kaepernick's protests against police brutality." *The Washington Post*. June 1, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/06/01/colin-kaepernick-kneeling-history/>.
- Bowman, Tom. "Gen. Mark Milley Apologizes for Appearing in a Photo-Op with President Trump." *NPR*. June 11, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/11/875311214/gen-mark-milley-apologizes-for-appearing-in-a-photo-op-with-president-trump>.
- Brannen, Samuel J., Christian S. Haig, and Katherine Schmidt. "The Age of Mass Protests: Understanding an Escalating Global Trend." *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. March 2020. https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200303_MassProtests_V2.pdf?uL3KRAKjoHfmcnFENNWTXdUbf0Fk0Qke.
- Brown, Melissa S., Editor. *Giving USA 2001: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2000*. AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy. No. 46 (2001).
- Brown, Melissa S. Editor. *Giving USA 2005: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2004*. AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy. No. 50 (2005).
- Buchanan, Larry Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." *The New York Times*. July 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.
- Burch, Audra D.S, Weiyi Cai, Gabriel Gianordoli, Morrigan McCarthy, and Jugal K. Patel. "How Black Lives Matter Reached Every Corner of America." *The New York Times*. June 13, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/13/us/george-floyd-protests-cities-photos.html>.
- Carlson, John D. "Losing Our Civil Religion." *Religion and Politics*. September 26, 2017. <https://religionandpolitics.org/2017/09/26/losing-our-civil-religion/>.
- Campbell, David E., Geoffrey C. Layman, John C. Green, and Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo. "Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations." *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 3, (July 2018): 551-565.
- Center for Responsive Politics. "Donor Demographics." *Center for Responsive Politics*. <https://www.opensecrets.org/elections-overview/donor-demographics?cycle=2014&display=A>.

Center for Responsive Politics. "Energy/Natural Resources: Long-Term Contribution Trends." June 22, 2020. <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/totals.php?ind=E>.

Center for Responsive Politics. "Health: Long-Term Contribution Trends." June 22, 2020. <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/totals.php?cycle=2020&ind=H>.

Center for Responsive Politics. "National Rifle Assn." *Center for Responsive Politics*. June 26, 2020. <https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/detail.php?cycle=2004&cmte=National+Rifle+Assn>.

Center for Responsive Politics. "Planned Parenthood." *Center for Responsive Politics*. June 26, 2020. <https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/detail.php?cycle=2006&cmte=Planned+Parenthood>.

Chaves, Mark. *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Chaves, Mark. "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority." *Social Forces* 72, no. 3, (March 1994): 749-774.

Coppins, McKay. "The Christians Who Loved Trump's Stunt." *The Atlantic*. June 2, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/06/trumps-biblical-spectacle-outside-st-johns-church/612529/>.

Courser, Zachary, Eric Helland, and Kenneth P. Miller. "Introduction." In *Parchment Barriers: Political Polarization and the Limits of Constitutional Order*, edited by Zachary Courser, Eric Helland, and Kenneth P. Miller, 1-13. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2018.

Cox, Daniel, and Robert P. Jones. "America's Changing Religious Identity." *PRRI*. September 6, 2017. <https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

Denman, Barbara. "J.D. Greear elected SBC President." *Baptist Press*. June 12, 2018. <http://www.bpnews.net/51059/jd-greear-elected-sbc-president>.

Dimock, Michael. "Defining generations: Where Millennials end and post-Millennials begin." *Pew Research Center*. March 1, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/01/defining-generations-where-millennials-end-and-post-millennials-begin/>.

- Djupe, Paul A., Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Kimberly H. Conger. "Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked to State Rates of the Nonreligious? The Importance of Salient Controversy." *Sage Journals Political Research Quarterly*. 1-13. April 26, 2018.
- ECFA. "Americans Donated \$125 Billion to Religion in 2018 - 29% of All Charitable Giving." *Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability*. <https://www.ecfa.org/Content/Americans-Donated-125-Billion-to-Religion-in-2018-29-of-All-Charitable-Giving>.
- Ellis, Niquel Terry. "Trump to join fired-up March for Life crowds as anti-abortion laws face court challenges." *USA Today*. January 24, 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2020/01/23/trump-crowds-rally-march-life-anti-abortion-laws-face-court-battles/2832250001/>.
- Esper, Mark T. "Secretary of Defense Esper Addresses Reporters Regarding Civil Unrest." US Dept of Defense. Transcript, June 3, 2020. <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2206685/secretary-of-defense-esper-addresses-reporters-regarding-civil-unrest/>.
- ESPN. "President Donald Trump reopens anthem debate with tweet aimed at Roger Goodell." *ESPN*. June 8, 2020. https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/29280329/donald-trump-reopens-anthem-debate-tweet-aimed-roger-goodell.
- Evangelical Leaders Survey. "Evangelical Leaders Don't Want Partisan Political Identity." *National Association of Evangelicals*. January 2018. <https://www.nae.net/evangelicals-leaders-dont-want-partisan-political-identity/>.
- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *Fichte: Addresses to the German Nation*. Edited by Gregory Moore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Fowler, Robert Booth, Laura R. Olson, Allen D. Hertzke, and Kevin R. Den Dulk. *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choices*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2014.
- "From James Madison to Jesse Jones and Others, 3 June 1811." *Founders Online*. National Archives. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/03-03-02-0377>.
- Gelles, Karl, Veronica Bravo, and George Petras. "How Police pushed aside protesters ahead of Trump's controversial church photo." *USA Today*. June 11, 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2020/06/05/george-floyd-protests-trump-church-photo-curfew-park/3127684001/>.

Gentile, Emilio. *Politics as Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Gjeltlen, Tom. "States Consider Whether Religious Services Qualify As 'Essential'." *NPR*. April 1, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/01/825667542/states-consider-whether-religious-services-qualify-as-essential>.

Goodstein, Laurie and Anemona Hartocollis. "Abortion Foes Aim to Compete with Turnout for Women's March." *The New York Times*. January 26, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/us/abortion-foes-compete-womens-march-turnout.html>.

Gorski, Philip. *American Babylon: Christianity and Democracy Before and After Trump*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.

Gorski, Philip. *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Green, Lisa Cannon. "ACP: Worship attendance rises, baptisms decline." *Baptist Press*. June 1, 2018. <http://www.bpnews.net/51000/acp-worship-attendance-rises-baptisms-decline>.

Griffin, Robert, William H. Frey, Ruy Teixeira. "States of Change: How Demographic Change is Transforming the Republican and Democratic Parties." *Center for American Progress*. June 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/20190701_StatesOfChange2019-report.pdf.

Hartley, James. "Prayer is needed now more than ever, Vice President Pence tells First Baptist Dallas." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. June 28, 2020. <https://www.star-telegram.com/news/politics-government/article243855712.html>.

Hammond, Phillip E., Amanda Porterfield, James G. Moseley, and Jonathan D. Sarna. "Forum: American Civil Religion Revisited." *Religion and American Culture* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1994).

"History." *March For Life*. March 25, 2013. <https://marchforlife.org/history/>.

Hout, Michael and Claude S. Fischer. "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations." *American Sociological Review* 67, (April 2002): 165-190.

- Itkowitz, Colby. "'No Brainer': Trump tweets support for amendment banning flag burning." *The Washington Post*. June 15, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/06/15/no-brainer-trump-tweets-support-amendment-banning-flag-burning/>.
- Jankowicz, Mia. "Trump's evangelical base is ecstatic over his bible photo op, which many other Christian leaders have condemned." *Insider*. June 4, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/the-christian-right-loved-trumps-bible-photo-op-outside-church-2020-6>.
- Kaplan Ann E., Editor. *Giving USA: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 1992*. AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy. No. 38, (1993).
- Kaplan Ann E., Editor. *Giving USA: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 1996*. AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy. No. 42 (1997).
- King, David P. and Thad Austin. "Religious Giving Holds Steady." *Lilly Family School of Philanthropy IUPI*, June 13, 2017. [https://philanthropy.iupui.edu/news-events/insights-newsletter/2017-issues/june-2017-issue1.html#:~:text=Giving%20to%20religion%20in%202016,\(education%20at%2015.3%20percent\)](https://philanthropy.iupui.edu/news-events/insights-newsletter/2017-issues/june-2017-issue1.html#:~:text=Giving%20to%20religion%20in%202016,(education%20at%2015.3%20percent)).
- Lugo, Luis. "Religion Among the Millennials: Less Religiously Active than Older Americans, But Fairly Traditional in Other Ways." *Pew Research Center: A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Report*. February 2010. 1. Accessed June 25, 2018. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/02/millennials-report.pdf>.
- MacLaughlin, Steve. "Key Findings from Giving USA 2013 Report." *sgENGAGE*. June 18, 2013. <https://npengage.com/nonprofit-news/key-findings-from-giving-usa-2013-report/>.
- Marcus, Benjamin P. "How Trump is reshaping American civil religion and what we can do about it." *Religion News Service*. July 10, 2017. <https://religionnews.com/2017/07/10/how-trump-is-reshaping-american-civil-religion-and-what-we-can-do-about-it/>.
- Margolis, Michele F. *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Mathisen, James A. "Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion? (Thematic Issue: a Durkheimian Miscellany)." *Sociological Analysis* 50, no. 2 (July 1, 1989).
- McCarty, Nolan. *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Melwert, Jim. "Wolf, Arkoosh—2 outspoken proponents for PA. stay-at-home orders—criticized for marching with protestors." *Kywnnewsradio*. June 5, 2020. <https://kywnnewsradio.radio.com/articles/news/proponents-for-stay-at-home-order-criticized-for-protesting>.

Montanaro, Domenico. "Trump Returns to Campaign Trail With A Familiar Message In A Changing World." *NPR*. June 20, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/20/881313605/trump-crowd-size-underwhelms-campaign-blames-protesters>.

National Association of Evangelicals. "About NAE." *National Association of Evangelicals*. Accessed August 1, 2018. <https://www.nae.net/about-nae/>.

Newport, Frank. "2017 Update on Americans and Religion." *Gallup*. December 22, 2017. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/224642/2017-update-americans-religion.aspx>.

Pew Research Center. "America's Changing Religious Landscape." *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*. May 12, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

Pew Research Center. "Americans Have Positive Views About Religion's Role in Society, but Want It Out of Politics." *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*. November 15, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/11/15/americans-have-positive-views-about-religions-role-in-society-but-want-it-out-of-politics/>.

Pew Research Center. "Detailed tables: Trends in religious composition of U.S. adults." *Pew Research Center*. October 17, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2019/10/Detailed-Tables-v1-FOR-WEB.pdf>.

Pew Research Center. "How Does Pew Research Center Measure the Religious Composition of the U.S.? Answers to Frequently Asked Questions." *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*. July 5, 2018. <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/07/05/how-does-pew-research-center-measure-the-religious-composition-of-the-u-s-answers-to-frequently-asked-questions/>.

Pew Research Center. "In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*. October 17, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

Pew Research Center. "'Nones' on the Rise." *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*. October 9, 2012. <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

- Pew Research Center. "Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal." *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*. October 10, 2019. <https://www.people-press.org/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/>.
- Pew Research Center. "The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart." *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*. September 13, 2016. <https://www.people-press.org/2016/09/13/the-parties-on-the-eve-of-the-2016-election-two-coalitions-moving-further-apart/>.
- Pew Research Center. "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider." *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy*. October 5, 2017. <https://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>.
- Pew Research Center. "White Evangelicals See Trump as Fighting for Their Beliefs, Though Many Have Mixed Feelings About His Personal Conduct." *Pew Research Center*. March 12, 2020. <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/03/12/white-evangelicals-see-trump-as-fighting-for-their-beliefs-though-many-have-mixed-feelings-about-his-personal-conduct/>.
- Putnam, Robert D. and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2010.
- Reinhart, RJ. "One in Three Americans Have Felt Urge to Protest." *Gallup*. August 24, 2018. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/241634/one-three-americans-felt-urge-protest.aspx>.
- Saad, Lydia, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Megan Brennan. "Understanding Shifts in Democratic Party Ideology." *Gallup*. February 19, 2019. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/246806/understanding-shifts-democratic-party-ideology.aspx>.
- Sandfort, Melissa H. and Jennifer G. Haworth. "Whassup? A Glimpse into the Attitude and Beliefs of the Millennial Generation." *Journal of College and Character*. 3:3. 2002. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.2202/1940-1639.1314?needAccess=true>.
- SgEngage, "Giving USA Report for 2008 and Online Fundraising Estimates." *sgENGAGE*. June 10, 2009. <https://npengage.com/nonprofit-fundraising/giving-usa-report-for-2008-and-online-fundraising-estimates/#:~:text=Of%20the%20%24307.7%20billion%20given,giving%20has%20topped%20%24100%20billion>.
- Shellnut, Kate. "Paige Patterson Fired by Southwestern, Stripped of Retirement Benefits." *Christianity Today*. May 30, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/may/paige-patterson-fired-southwestern-baptist-seminary-sbc.html>.

- Shimron, Yonat "J.D. Greear is ready to give Southern Baptists a makeover." *Religion News Service*. Last modified June 6, 2018. Accessed, July 24, 2018.
<https://religionnews.com/2018/06/06/j-d-greear-is-ready-to-give-southern-baptists-a-makeover/>.
- Sider, Ronald J. Editor. *The Spiritual Danger of Donald Trump: 30 Evangelical Christians on Justice, Trust, and Moral Integrity*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020.
- Smidt, Corwin E. *American Evangelicals Today*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013.
- Smith, Gregory A. and Jessica Martinez. "How the faithful voted: A preliminary 2016 analysis." Pew Research Center. November 9, 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.
- Smith, Gregory A. "White evangelicals among groups with slipping confidence in Trump's handling of COVID-19." *Pew Research Center*. May 14, 2020.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/14/white-evangelicals-among-groups-with-slipping-confidence-in-trumps-handling-of-covid-19/>.
- Smith, Samuel. "Religious 'nones' now as big as evangelicals in the US, new data shows." *The Christian Post*. March 20, 2019. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/religious-nones-now-as-big-as-evangelicals-in-the-us-new-data-shows.html>.
- Southern Baptist Convention. "Fast Facts About the SBC." *Southern Baptist Convention*. June 26, 2018. <http://www.sbc.net/BecomingSouthernBaptist/FastFacts.asp>.
- Sullivan, Andrew. "America's New Religions." *Intelligencer*. *New York*, December 7, 2018.
<http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/12/andrew-sullivan-americas-new-religions.html>.
- Thomas, Michael and Charles Flippen. "American Civil Religion: An Empirical Study." *Social Forces* 51, no. 2 (December 1972).
- Thomson-DeVeaux, Ameilia and Daniel Cox. "The Christian Right Is Helping Drive Liberals Away From Religion." *FiveThirtyEight*. September 18, 2019.
<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-christian-right-is-helping-drive-liberals-away-from-religion/>.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Edited by J.P. Mayer and translated by George Lawrence. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1966.

- Trump, Donald J. "Remarks by President Trump at South Dakota's 2020 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration | Keystone, South Dakota." *WhiteHouse.gov*. July 4, 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-south-dakotas-2020-mount-rushmore-fireworks-celebration-keystone-south-dakota/>.
- Wald, Kenneth D. *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 2nd ed. Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 1992.
- Wallace, Tim and Alicia Parlapiano. "Crowd Scientists Say Women's March in Washington Had 3 Times as Many People as Trump's Inauguration." *The New York Times*. January 22, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/22/us/politics/womens-march-trump-crowd-estimates.html>.
- Waters, Richard D. and Denise Seveck Bortree. "'Can We Talk About the Direction of This Church?': The Impact of Responsiveness and Conflict on Millennial's Relationship With Religious Institutions." *Journal of Media and Religion*. 11:4. November 20, 2012. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15348423.2012.730330?scroll=top&needAccess=true&>.
- Weber, Nathan. Editor. *Giving USA: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 1990*. AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy. No. 36 (1991).
- Wehner, Peter. "The Moral Universe of Timothy Keller." *The Atlantic*. December 5, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/timothy-kellers-moral-universe/603001/>.
- Wimberly, Ronald C. "Continuity in the Measurement of Civil Religion." *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1979).
- Wimberly, Ronald C. "Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis." *Sociological Analysis* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1976).
- Wraight, Christopher D. *Rousseau's The Social Contract*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Wuthnow, Robert. "Divided We Fall: America's Two Civil Religions." *The Christian Century* 105. April 20, 1988. <https://www.religion-online.org/article/divided-we-fall-americas-two-civil-religions/>.

Biographical Statement

Jonathan Hemler currently serves as an active-duty naval officer. After graduating from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis with a B.S. in Political Science in 2011, he began flight training and became a Navy helicopter pilot in 2013. He currently works as a Naval ROTC instructor at the University of Texas at Austin where he teaches courses on naval history and navigation and naval operations.